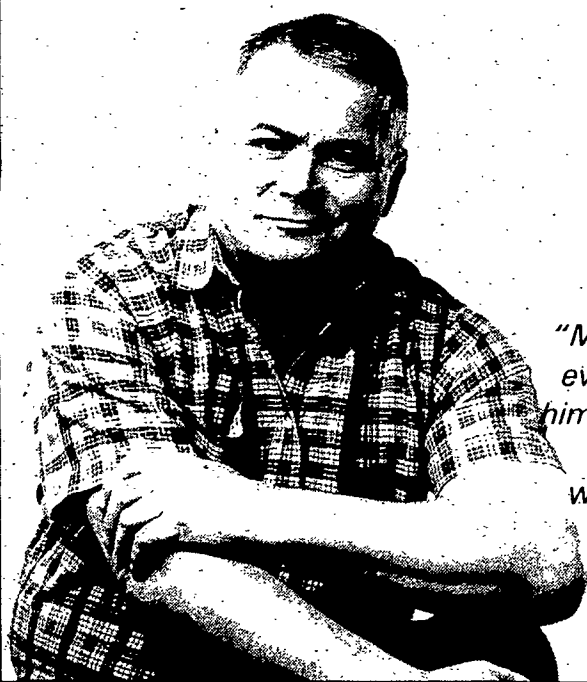


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Sabbath

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Societal trends and Sabbath observance were the focus of Pope John Paul II's apostolic letter, *Dies Domini: On Observing and Celebrating the Lord's Day*, released May 31. The pontiff observed that "changes in socioeconomic conditions" have led to "profound modifications of social behavior and hence of the character of Sunday."

"Until quite recently, it was easier in traditionally Christian countries to keep Sunday holy because it was almost a universal practice," the pope wrote. "Unfortunately, when Sunday loses its fundamental meaning and becomes merely part of the weekend, it can happen that people stay locked within a horizon so limited that they can no longer see 'the heavens.'"

Where did the time go?

According to the Bible, Sabbath observance goes back to the beginning of creation, when God rested on the seventh day. In Exodus 16:29, God commands the people of Israel to uphold the Sabbath: "On the seventh day everyone is to stay home and no one is to go out."

The Jewish Sabbath begins on Friday evening and continues through Saturday, or the seventh day. Catholics observe Sabbath from Saturday evening to Sunday evening. This "eighth day" commemorates the resurrection of Christ.

Pope John Paul emphasized that Christians are to treat Sundays as special days for church, family time and good deeds.

"Inviting to a meal people who are alone, visiting the sick, providing food for needy families, spending a few hours in voluntary work and acts of solidarity: These would certainly be ways of bringing into people's lives the love of Christ ...," the pope wrote in *Dies Domini*.

Joan Workmaster, diocesan director of liturgy, said the tradition of strict Sunday observance in this country probably began wavering in the 1950s and 1960s, "when the first malls were being built."

As more businesses opened up on Sundays, a higher percentage of the work force struggled to get to Sunday Mass. This trend, Workmaster said, led the Catholic Church to institute a vigil Mass on Saturdays to fulfill Sunday obligation.

Father David Simon noted that more and more salaried professionals are finding it harder to complete their work week by Friday, thus putting a strain on their Sabbath observance.

"They only have Sundays left to do repairs around the house. I know of people who work 75-hour weeks just to keep their job, and they're too tired for liturgy and family," said Father Simon, pastor at St. Margaret Mary in Apalachin.

In the 1997 book *Practicing Our Faith*, editor Dorothy Bass warned against preoccupation with work and productivity in a section titled "Keeping the Sabbath."

"Overworked Americans need rest, and they need to be reminded that they do not cause the grain to grow and that their greatest fulfillment does not come through the acquisition of material things," Bass wrote.

Ironically, modern technology hasn't necessarily made our lives easier, said Sister Patricia Schoelles, SSJ.

"Are we happier? No, I'm not happier. I'm more stressed," commented Sister Schoelles, president of St. Bernard's Institute. She will conduct a seminar, "Balancing Family, Jobs and God," on Oct. 14 at St. Boniface Church in Rochester.

According to Karen Rinefierd, the pace of society can render Sunday Mass as just another activity on the Sabbath.

"You cross that off on your list of things that have to get done," said Rinefierd, who serves as diocesan coordinator of young adult, adult and family faith formation.

Are other faiths succumbing to these patterns? Not necessarily, said Father Brian Cool, co-pastor of St. Michael's/St. Andrew's Parish in Penn Yan and Dundee.

When Father Cool was parochial vicar at St. John of Rochester Church in Perinton, he recalled, the parish's CYO basketball team rescheduled a game against the Jewish Community Center because it fell on a Saturday — the Jewish Sabbath day. The game was moved to ... Sunday.

"There was no questioning of that (by Catholics)," observed Father Cool, who printed excerpts from the pope's *Dies Domini* letter in his Sept. 6 parish bulletin.

What you can do

Sabbath observance will be part of Sister Schoelles' Oct. 14 lecture at St. Boniface. The program, to be co-presented with Deacon Thomas Driscoll, is part of the St. Bernard's on the Road adult educational series.

"The culture used to close down on Sunday; now you have to build it into your life. It's got to be done, but it's a decision that we haven't been trained to make," Sister Schoelles remarked.

In the 1997 book *Make Family Time Prime Time: Fun Ways to Build Faith in Your Family*, authors Denise C. Yrlbarren and DeAnn L. Koestner suggested that families shut off the stereo, TV, computer or phone in favor of such Sabbath activities as reading, praying, taking walks, writing letters or playing games.

"At first, your children may express boredom with the lack of entertainment provided during this quiet time," the book said. "But slowly, they will begin to participate in the more reflective activities, and in that short period, your family will have spent time coming closer to God and to each other."

Father Thomas Watts, pastor at St. James/St. Pius X churches in Waverly and Van Etten, said his parish has offered such church-based Sunday events as Bible study and parent education "so that people can try to get back to what Sundays should be," he remarked.

Father Cool, noting that many parish youth groups meet on Sunday nights, thinks this is a good way of drawing young people into Sabbath observance.

"It's a continuation of giving praise and worship to God. It makes sense," Father Cool said.

On the other hand, Father Simon said he refrains from scheduling church activities on Sundays so that families can spend time together — even if that means going to the shopping mall.

"Who's to say that shopping isn't recreating?" Father Simon said.

Whiting added that Sunday activities away from home or church don't necessarily break the intent of Sabbath as a family day. The one positive aspect of her family's Sunday youth football games, she said, "is that we're together."

Rinefierd agreed that attendance at Sunday social events has the potential to unify.

"It can either be a gathering, or a total distraction," she said. "Are you participating with your loved ones, or are you doing them separately?"

For Catholics whose schedules don't permit them to observe Sabbath on Sunday, Rinefierd suggested designating another time of the week.

"The underlying value is crucial — to have that special Sabbath time," Rinefierd said. However, she added, "I think it's smarter for most of us to try to keep it to Sundays, because the day has a natural affinity with God."

To separate Sabbath time from societal influence, Workmaster suggested examining our Christian roots.

"The message of the Gospel is counter-cultural. It asks us to step aside from what everybody else is doing," Workmaster remarked.

And the pope promotes the Sabbath not as a tedious obligation, but a joyful observance of our faith.

"I would strongly urge everyone to rediscover Sunday," the pope wrote in *Dies Domini*. "Do not be afraid to give your time to Christ! Time given to Christ is never time lost."