

*Excerpts taken from the book
Around the year with the Trapp Family*

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The Land Without a Sunday

Our neighbors in Austria were getting increasingly curious about Russia and what life there was really like. One day they decided to take a six-weeks trip all over Russia in their car. Of all the things they had seen and observed, one experience had most deeply impressed them: Russia had done away with Sunday. This had shocked them even more than what they saw of Siberian concentration camps. The absence of Sunday seemed to be the root of all the evil.

Father Joseph teaches us about Sunday

Father began by giving us a history of the development of the Sunday in Apostolic times. The first Christian community in Jerusalem remained faithful to the observation of the Sabbath Day as well as to the prayer in the Temple, as we know from the "Acts of the Apostles." As their Lord and Saviour had risen from the dead on the day after the Sabbath--"in Prima Sabbathi," as the four Evangelists call that day--the first Christian community celebrated, not the seventh day, like the Jews, but the first day of the week, and so made every Sunday into a little Easter.

Then Father Joseph suggested we read in the "Acts of the Apostles" about those times when the young Church was increasingly faced with the perplexing question whether non-Jewish converts from paganism should be obliged to observe all the Jewish laws too, as, for instance, the observation of the Sabbath Day. And we read about the Council of Jerusalem around the year 50 A.D., when the Apostles decided that the Sabbath Day need not be observed any more. From then on the "Acts of the Apostles" reveal that those two sacred days begin to conflict. St. Paul still uses the Sabbath to teach in the synagogues about Jesus Christ, but he also organizes and presides over the Sunday celebration in the new Christian communities of the Greek world. The conflict becomes more open toward the end of the first century when the Christians cease to call their holy day "Sabbath" and name it "the Lord's Day," or "Dominica," instead. We find the first mention of "the Lord's Day" in the first chapter of the Apocalypse, where St. John says that his vision took place on "the Lord's Day." St. Ignatius of Antioch will use this term again in his letters to the young Christian communities. In the Didache, one of the earliest descriptions of the lives of the first Christians, we find the sentence, "But on the Lord's Day, when you have gathered together, break bread and give thanks."

In the days of St. Ignatius, who was martyred around the year 110, the Christians went one step further in their detachment from the Old Testament, which now was considered as a symbol and prefiguration, to be fulfilled in the New Testament. St. Ignatius writes that "it is monstrous to talk of Jesus Christ and to practice Judaism." In his day, the Sunday already had completely replaced the Sabbath of the Old Law as the weekly sacred day.

Then Father Joseph told us about the situation of the Christians outside the Holy Land. In the Roman Empire, every ninth day was a holiday. The Christians in Rome and Asia Minor were unacquainted with the main characteristic of the Jewish Sabbath Day--the complete cessation of work. Living under Roman law, it would have been impossible for them to stop working, especially in periods of persecution. We now came to see that, while the act of worship of the Sabbath of old consisted in abstaining from work, the act of worship of the Sunday of the Christians consisted, from the very beginning, in the celebration of the Eucharist. To assist at the sacrifice of the Mass was strictly indispensable. Even in times of persecution, when the Church had to go underground, the Holy Eucharist was celebrated secretly in private homes early in the morning. Every Sunday morning the Christians risked their lives in order to celebrate the Holy Eucharist. We know that Rome had its very efficient secret police and that during the first three hundred years of Christianity, thousands of martyrs sacrificed their lives. What a great day Sunday must have been to those people! One of our children asked, "Father Joseph, didn't the early Christians always celebrate Holy Mass in the catacombs?" and he answered that the most recent archeological findings show that the most ancient churches in Rome were erected on the foundations of private homes; the common belief is now that the catacombs, as public cemeteries, would have been too easy a target for the Roman police. Only occasionally

Holy Mass was said there, over the body of one of the martyrs; the usual Sunday celebration would take place secretly in private homes.

Next we saw the Church rising in the beginning of the fourth century. The times of persecution were over; a new life was beginning. The ceremonies of the Holy Eucharist did not have to be held in secret and in the dark of the night; they could now be celebrated in broad daylight. This led to important changes in the celebration of Sunday. From now on the Sunday liturgy begins to develop more and more. In the fourth century the great Roman basilicas were erected in different parts of the big city.

At this phase of our study, we spent many evening hours with Father Joseph, listening to his explanation of the origin of the station churches. On the main Sundays of the year, such as Pentecost and the Sundays following the Ember Days, the Pope used to go in solemn procession to celebrate Holy Mass in one of these basilicas, accompanied by all the clergy and faithful of Rome.

In the fourth century the Sunday took on a new character. Now the Church could afford to declare it the official holy day of the week. In the sixth century we see that the cessation of work has already become a law.

A new change became apparent with the flowering of monasticism. From the very beginning, the monks took up the idea of hourly prayer throughout the day and of special prayers at midnight. This had a decided influence on the celebration of the Sunday vigil, which had always been observed but was now becoming a general practice. After having spent the greater part of the night from Saturday to Sunday and the morning hours in prayer and meditation, the Sunday necessarily took on the character of a day of rest. Now the Sunday had taken over completely the function of the Sabbath. It had become both a day of worship and a day of rest.

Parallel with the development of the Sunday went the development of the liturgical year. In the beginning, the Christians celebrated only one feast: that of Easter. It began on Good Friday, rose to its height on Easter Sunday and was continued during fifty days, the Paschal season, which ended with Pentecost Sunday. The first four hundred years of Christianity did not know the season of Lent, but the Christians fasted every Friday, and later every Wednesday also.

In the fourth century a new feast came to be celebrated: the anniversary of Christ's birth; and just as Pentecost was the completion of Easter, so the feast of the Epiphany became the conclusion of the festive Christmas time. The liturgy of the fourth century, then, was centered on two big feasts Christmas and Easter. As time went on, both of these feasts developed further and added weeks of preparation, the season of Lent and the season of Advent. Now the liturgical year was formed. Its development had a most important influence on Sunday. So far the Sundays had repeated over and over again the celebration of the same mystery: Christ rising from the dead. Now, however, each Sunday took on a significance of its own. No longer were there just "Sundays," but Sundays during Advent, Sundays during Lent, Sundays after Easter, and Sundays after Pentecost.

Of course, our children wanted to know: "And how about the feasts of the saints?" And we learned that during the first few hundred years only a martyr was considered worthy of being commemorated on a special feast day. On the anniversary of his martyrdom Holy Mass would be said, but only at the place where his body rested. This restricted the feasts of the martyrs to specific places. Beginning with the fourth century, saints that had not died the death of martyrdom were given a special feast. Such a feast doubled the octave of the day; hence the name "double feast." For many centuries, however, the sanctoral cycle was considered secondary to the temporal cycle, which is seen, for instance, in the law that during the time of Lent no feast of a saint could be celebrated. Of course, no Sunday would ever yield to the feast of a saint, however famous.

During the Middle Ages the Sunday, besides still being the commemoration of the Resurrection of Christ, took on a special character as a day of forgiveness and mercy. From the ninth century on, the Church asked that on Sunday all military operations be suspended!

In this period falls the development of the liturgical drama. The reading of the Gospel, the reading of the Passion on Good Friday and of the Gospel of the Resurrection on Easter Sunday started it. Several members of the clergy, dressed in alb and stole, took on the different parts in order to make Holy Mass more interesting to the faithful who no longer understood Latin, the language of the Church. It became more and more common to enact parts of the Gospel stories in the sanctuary. In those times the people began to forget that the liturgy should, first and foremost, be prayer and adoration, and not entertainment for the faithful. Furthermore, throughout the Middle Ages the liturgy of the saints grew in importance. The feast of the saints were multiplying and encroaching on the Sundays. Finally,

the slightest double feast had precedence over the Sunday, until, finally, in the eighteenth century only Easter Sunday and Pentecost Sunday were properly Sundays and not a saint's day. All the other liturgical Sunday Masses had vanished, even those of the Sundays of Advent and Lent. This condition lasted until, finally, the holy Pope Pius X saw the seriousness of this state of affairs and remedied it with his great reform, which gave the lost Sunday back to the Church.

This is only a brief summary of what we learned in weeks and months about the history of the Sunday. We were also made aware that Our Lord had singled out Sundays for His most solemn acts and commands--His Resurrection, the command to the Apostles to go and preach to the whole world, the institution of the Sacrament of Penance and the Descent of the Holy Ghost on Pentecost. Having realized this, the Sunday can never be a day like any other to us. It is truly a consecrated day, a day of grace.

And this launched us on a new search--for more and more knowledge about the "day of grace." From the very beginning Sunday brought to all Christians, first of all, the grace of dedication. It gave and gives them the unique chance to surrender themselves entirely to God. To what an extent this was true we came to see especially at the times of persecution. Since, from the very beginning, to assist at Mass was identical with receiving Communion, anybody who did not appear at Sunday Mass thereby excommunicated himself and was not considered a member of the Church any more. To the ones who cooperated with this grace of dedication, however, Sunday turned immediately into a day of joy, because joy is the result of dedication. As soon as we surrender ourselves completely to God, our hearts will be filled with peace and joy. Therefore, every Sunday the Church repeats in the Office the words which sound like an echo from Easter: "This is the day which the Lord hath made. Let us rejoice and be glad." So we see that, besides the grace of dedication, the liturgy of the Sunday obtains also for us the grace of joy and the grace of peace. Another grace we discovered, which is designed directly for the majority of the faithful who cannot afford to say with the psalmist, "Seven times a day I have given praise to Thee," and for whom the seven canonical hours and the nightly vigils are some kind of spiritual luxury. God, in His great mercy, has set aside for them every week a sacred day and for that day has provided the grace of contemplation, which otherwise seems reserved only for the ones who have "time to pray." Since the days of St. Jerome it has been believed that the Sunday bestows on all who celebrate it in a Christian manner the grace of contemplation. In the Middle Ages the lay people used to flock into the convents and monasteries on Sundays to talk about God and spiritual things with the ones they considered professionals--the monks and nuns--as we can read in the autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila.

Yet another grace Sunday has in store for us. As we have a right to believe eternity will be one uninterrupted Easter Sunday, so every Sunday throughout the year helps the Christian people to prepare for that great Sunday to come. It is a day of expectation, a weekly reminder that here is only the beginning of true happiness.

The theme is endless. More and more graces will be discovered as we meditate together on the mystery of the Sunday.

It is wonderful to make such discoveries together with children or young people. To them, things are either right or wrong, and as soon as they feel in their own lives that they are not as they should be, they immediately undertake "to do something about it." That is the way it was with our children and the Sunday.

Even the younger ones knew that "to visit the sick" and "to help the poor" on Sunday corresponds to the character of a day of mercy, dating back to the ninth century.

After our talk with Father Joseph, our previous observation of Sunday seemed to me like a house built on unprepared ground, until a true builder saw it, straightened it up, and put a strong foundation underneath.

And Then We Came to America

In the first weeks we were too bewildered by too many things to notice any particular difference about the Sunday, but I remember missing the sound of the church bells. When I asked why the bells of St. Patrick's Cathedral do not ring on Sunday morning, I was told, to my boundless astonishment, that it would be too much noise.

As we got more used to being in America and as our English progressed, we made a startling discovery Saturday night in America! It was so utterly different from what we were used to. Everybody seemed to be out. The stores were open until ten, and people went shopping. Practically everybody seemed to go to a show or a dance or a party on Saturday night. And finally we discovered the consequence of the American Saturday night: the

American Sunday morning. Towns abandoned, streets empty, everybody sleeping until the last minute and then whizzing in his car around the corner to the eleven o'clock Sunday service.

When we lived in a suburb of Philadelphia in our second year in this country, we found that the rich man's Sunday delight seemed to consist of putting on his oldest torn pants and cutting his front lawn, or washing his car with a hose, or even cutting down a tree. There was none of that serenity and peace of the old-world Sunday anywhere until we discovered the Mennonites. They even rang the church bells!

The climax of our discoveries about the American Sunday was reached when a lady exclaimed to us with real feeling, "Oh, how I hate Sunday! What a bore!" I can still hear the shocked silence that followed this remark. The children looked hurt and outraged, almost as if they expected fire to rain from heaven. Even the offender noticed something, and that made her explain why she hated Sunday as vigorously as she did. It explained a great deal of the mystery of the American Sunday.

"Why," she burst out, "I was brought up the Puritan way. Every Saturday night our mother used to collect all our toys and lock them up. On Sunday morning we children had to sit through a long sermon which we didn't understand; we were not allowed to jump or run or play." When she met the unbelieving eyes of our children, she repeated, "Yes, honestly--no play at all." Finally one of ours asked, "But what were you allowed to do?"

"We could sit on the front porch with the grownups or read the Bible. That was the only book allowed on Sunday." And she added: "Oh, how I hated Sunday when I was young. I vowed to myself that when I grew up I would do the dirtiest work on Sunday, and if I should have children, they would be allowed to do exactly as they pleased. They wouldn't even have to go to church."

This was the answer. The pendulum had swung out too far to one side, and now it was going just as far in the other direction; let us hope it will find its proper position soon.

I remember my astonishment when our Holy Father, Pope Pius XII, found it necessary to say, in his address on Catholic Action in September, 1947 "Sunday must become again the day of the Lord, the day of adoration, of prayer, of rest, of recollection and of reflection, of happy reunion in the intimate circle of the family." Such a pronouncement, I knew, is meant for the whole world. Was Sunday endangered everywhere, then ?

I came to understand that the Christian Sunday is threatened more and more both from without and from within--from without through the systematic efforts of the enemies of Christianity, and from within through the mediocrity and superficiality of the Christians themselves who are making of Sunday merely a day of rest, relaxing from work only by seeking entertainment. There was once a time, the Old Testament tells us, when people had become so lazy that they shunned any kind of spiritual effort and no longer attended public worship, so that God threatened them through the mouth of the prophet Osee: "I shall cause all her joy to cease, her feast days and her Sabbath, and all her solemn feasts."

And now the words of our present Holy Father in his encyclical "*Mediator Dei*" sound a similar warning: "How will those Christians not fear spiritual death whose rest on Sundays and feast days is not devoted to religion and piety, but given over to the allurements of the world! Sundays and holidays must be made holy by divine worship which gives homage to God and heavenly food to the soul....Our soul is filled with the greatest grief when we see how the Christian people profane the afternoon of feast days...."

Newspapers and magazines nowadays all stress the necessity of fighting Communism. There is one weapon, however, which they do not mention and which would be the most effective one if wielded by every Christian. Again the Holy Father reminds us of it: "The results of the struggle between belief and unbelief will depend to a great extent on the use that each of the opposing fronts will make of Sunday." We know what use Russia made of the Sunday. The question now is:

And how about us--you and I?