

Chapter Two

Days, Weeks, Months

Seven Holy Tombs was mostly a Catholic neighborhood, but we always got Protestant weather,” laments author John Powers in his fictionalized memoirs. In that era Catholic children stayed indoors on Good Friday out of respect for the passion and death of Christ. Powers, however, admits having spent “a lot of time between noon and three o’clock staring out the living room window at the non-Catholics,” who were playing outdoors on that invariably bright and sunny afternoon.¹

Even when the weather doesn’t cooperate, Catholics have a sense of particularly sacred times—moments set aside for certain activities or dedicated to particular meditations. It is one of the ways the Church sanctifies the year.

HOURS OF THE DAY

“Seven times a day I praise you,” sings the psalmist (Psalm 119:164). Jews and Christians have long aspired to lift their voices in prayer at certain times throughout the day; early monastics even attempted to say all 150 psalms every day. This practice gave birth to the Liturgy of the Hours, in which all the psalms were said in a weekly cycle of seven daily “hours.”

Eventually the Hours became mandatory for religious orders and clergy. Lay interest in the Hours led to the

widespread recitation of the rosary, consisting of 150 Hail Marys symbolizing the number of psalms. With the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, the cycle of psalms recited in the Hours was stretched out over a month, one of the seven hours was dropped; but, for the first time, the laity were specifically invited to participate.

Other devotions have arisen to similarly fill our days with prayer.

THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

On meeting Sabitha's grandmother Dorothy, Andrew was struck by her use of the Sign of the Cross. Each time we left her apartment, each time we left a house, each time Andrew turned the keys in the ignition, she crossed herself. An act of praise to the Holy Trinity, of sorrow for sin to the crucified Lord, of gratitude that the cross has been applied to our individual soul, of petition for whatever it precedes, the Sign of the Cross is perhaps the most basic Christian prayer.

At the end of the second century, Tertullian explained: "At every forward step,...at every going in and out, when we put on our clothes and shoes,...when we sit at table,...in all the ordinary actions of daily life, we trace upon the forehead the sign."²

THE MORNING OFFERING

As an act of self-offering, the Sign of the Cross takes on special significance in the morning. Saint John Vianney often spoke of the importance of making a morning offering. "Jesus Christ," he explained, "by His sufferings and His death, has made all our actions meritorious, so that for the good Christian there is no motion of our hearts or of our

bodies which will not be rewarded if we perform them for Him.”³

What does he mean by *meritorious*? The world was created so that through it humanity might come to love and praise God; but once humanity alienated itself from God, the earthly world and ordinary life were deprived of this purpose. With Christ’s redemption the ordinary world was redeemed: The world can once again support beings who love and praise their Creator.

A Protestant friend once explained, “I may have led a ‘good’ life in high school, but it didn’t ‘count’ because I didn’t do it for love of Jesus.” And that is the Catholic teaching on merit, on actions that “count”: To be redeemed is to love God, and by keeping his commandments we remain God’s friends and work out our salvation (see John 15:14; Philippians 2:12). We love God when we work or study well for his sake, when we enjoy the company of our family for the love of God, when we lovingly entrust ourselves to him before we sleep.

“All you have to do,” specified Saint John Vianney, “is to have in view the object of pleasing God in everything you do.” We need only, each morning as we awake, think of God, make the Sign of the Cross and offer our day to him. “Oh, how we could merit Heaven every day, my dear brethren, by doing just our ordinary duties, but by doing them for God and the salvation of our souls!”⁴

Here’s one of many versions of the Morning Offering:

O my God, I adore, I love you with all my heart. I thank you for having created me, having saved me by your grace, and

having preserved me during the night. I offer you all my prayers, works, joys, and sufferings of this day: grant that they may all be according to Your will and for Your greater glory. + Amen.

THE ANGELUS

The Angelus is a celebration of the very heart of Christianity: the conviction that God has become man in the Person of Jesus Christ. The Hail Mary is natural to this prayer, of course, because the Hail Mary is formed from the verses spoken by the archangel Gabriel and Saint Elizabeth in the events surrounding the Incarnation (see Luke 1:28, 42). The very name *Angelus* comes from the prayer's opening word in Latin, meaning "angel."

The Angelus is said three times a day: at six in the morning, twelve noon and six in the evening. The prayer is an ideal way to call to mind the essence of Christianity throughout the day. It even includes some "Catholic aerobics": When it is said standing, all genuflect at the words "and the Word became Flesh." During the Easter Season the hymn *Regina Coeli* usually replaces the Angelus.

Leader: The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary.

All: And she conceived of the Holy Spirit. Hail Mary, . . .

Leader: Behold the handmaid of the Lord.

All: Be it done unto me according to your word. Hail Mary, . . .

Leader: And the Word was made flesh.

All: And dwelt among us. Hail Mary, . . .

Leader: Pray for us, O holy Mother of God.

All: That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.

Leader: Let us pray.

All: Pour forth, we beseech you, O Lord, your grace into our hearts, that as we have known the incarnation of Christ, your Son, by the message of an angel, so by his passion and cross we may be brought to the glory of his resurrection, through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.⁵

EVENING PRAYERS

Morning and evening are primary hours of prayer in the Christian tradition, as evidenced by Lauds and Vespers in the Liturgy of the Hours. The psalmist says, "Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, / and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice!" (Psalm 141:2).

After a long day most of us would rather collapse in front of the television than lift our arms in praise, but make every effort to gather your family for evening prayers: They could be called the minimum of family liturgy. Say a decade or five of the rosary, sing and pray in honor of the particular devotion of the month, celebrate special feasts or seasons with special prayers, present family concerns before the altar of God. You'll have as many choices as TV, with no fighting over the remote! As Father Patrick Peyton famously said, "The family that prays together stays together."

THE DAYS OF THE WEEK

Just as Christians have set aside certain hours of the day for particular prayers and concerns, the Church also has sanctified specific days of the week. While the Jews kept the Sabbath on Saturday, the early Church soon kept its holy day

on Sunday. Other days received their dedications, making the week a gradual unfolding of the story of Christ.

WEDNESDAY: THE BETRAYAL OF CHRIST

Since apostolic times Christians have dedicated Wednesday, Thursday and Friday to the remembrance of the passion and death of Christ. Wednesday marked Judas's betrayal, for that is when he contacted the temple priests (see Mark 14:1–2, 10–11). Jews at the time of Christ fasted on Mondays and Thursdays; the *Didache*, the first-century body of teaching on morality and prayer, exhorts Christians to fast on Wednesdays and Fridays.⁶

In the Western Church Wednesday is an informally penitential day: though the Church does not prescribe penance, a number of people keep the Wednesday fast. Because Saint Joseph often is remembered on this day, the fast is sometimes kept as a prayer for the sanctity of the family and individual family members.

THURSDAY: THE LAST SUPPER AND THE BLESSED SACRAMENT

The night before he died, our Lord took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to his disciples as truly his Body and Blood. Thursday is a special remembrance of this great gift—a gift that, Pope John Paul II wrote, the Church has received not as one gift among many but as “*the gift par excellence*, for it is the gift of himself, of his person in his sacred humanity, as well as the gift of his saving work.”⁷

Priests may offer special votive Masses in honor of the Eucharist on this day. Some parishes continue the tradition of celebrating a “holy hour” of eucharistic adoration on Thursday evenings. Even if your parish does not expose the

Eucharist for adoration, we recommend making a special attempt to visit Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament today.

FRIDAY: THE PASSION AND DEATH OF CHRIST

Just as each Sunday is a “little Easter” and day of feasting, each Friday is also a “little Good Friday” and shares in its penitential character. Canon Law calls for abstinence from all meat products on every Friday of the year. Following the Second Vatican Council, national bishops’ conferences were allowed to determine that, in their countries, the faithful would abstain from some other food, or the bishops could mandate some other act of penance (Canons 1251 and 1253).

The American bishops lifted the obligation of abstaining from meat in 1966 without prescribing a specific alternative act of penance, allowing Americans to fulfill their weekly obligation by whatever act of prayer, fasting or almsgiving they choose. Inspired by the example of Andrew’s grandparents, we usually abstain from meat in solidarity with the universal Church.

SATURDAY: THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

Since the ninth century the Church has honored Mary with special votive Masses on Saturday mornings.⁸ This commemoration is said to be related to the remembrance of Christ’s passion on Friday and resurrection on Sunday, for it was Mary who kept hope in her divine Son, unshaken in faith between his death and rising.

Notre Dame grads, however, know that Saturdays belong to Our Lady because the Irish take the field that day. As legendary coach Lou Holtz often said, “God doesn’t care who wins the football game, but his mother does. And her name

is Notre Dame." As students, Saturday morning solemn Mass in honor of the Blessed Virgin became one of our most intense moments of weekly prayer.

SUNDAY: THE RESURRECTION

The parents of the human family, the book of Genesis makes clear, were created out of the goodness of God, given a world that supplied all their needs and set aside for the company of God, who "walk[ed with them] in the garden in the cool of the day" (Genesis 3:8). When they betrayed their vocation to love and obey God alone, however, this life of resting in God came to an end. They were expelled from the garden and left to labor "all the days of your life" (Genesis 3:17).

The *Catechism* confirms that the purpose of human life is "to know him, to love him," and that to accomplish this once again, "God sent his Son as Redeemer and Savior" (CCC, 1). The Garden of Paradise, where humanity rested in peace with God, will once again be opened upon our entrance into eternal beatitude: No longer toiling slaves, we again will live fully our human vocation. Even now we enjoy "the first fruits of the Spirit" (Romans 8:23): Because of the redemption of Christ, we have a foretaste of that rest in God here on earth.

Sunday is the day consecrated to resting in God. The laws that regulate the life of the Church insist that the faithful abstain "from such work or business that would inhibit the worship to be given to God, the joy proper to the Lord's Day, or the due relaxation of mind and body,"⁹ often interpreted as more than four hours' servile work (see Canon 1247). This rest is not simply a "day off," a day to catch up on errands or

get ahead on work, but rather, as Maria von Trapp reminds us, a “unique chance to surrender...entirely to God.”¹⁰

Yes, we’re actually obligated to relax, enjoy our friends and family and worship a loving God for one-seventh of our life: Redemption is a great thing! The height of this opportunity is Sunday Mass, of course, which the Church also insists is fundamental to Christian identity and to a continuing relationship with Christ, an opportunity that must be taken (Canon 1247).

Maria von Trapp vividly describes the old Austrian practice of Sunday. Around five on Saturday afternoon, bells rang to announce the beginning of preparations for Sunday: the home cleaned, people washed, “Sunday best”—clothes worn only on Sunday—ironed, part of Sunday dinner prepared. After a leisurely dinner, the rosary was said, and the readings or Mass prayers might be read in advance.

In the morning people donned the “Sunday best” and walked to church, even if this took hours. A large Sunday meal came at noon, and afterward friends would meet, children play, people dance, adults make music.¹¹

In other parts of Europe, a candle would be lit during the evening meal in front of an image of the Holy Trinity: Today, the principal day of Christian worship, is the “feast” of the Triune God. During the meal parents would ask their children to recount the sermon’s message, with the father asking questions and the mother helping to supply the answers.¹²

How feasible these visions of Sunday are must be determined individually. They provide beautiful sketches of a day that the Church gives to family, friends, acts of mercy and, above all, God.