

IN DEFENSE OF THE SUNDAY LITURGY

By

H. J. Graf, S.V.D.

INTRODUCTION

In its reform of the liturgy the Council of Trent established the principle that double feasts of saints (duplex, the equivalent of the present-day obligatory memorial) had to take the precedence over the ordinary or "green" Sundays. At the time this was not seen as a danger for the liturgical celebration of Sunday, since there were only about 49 duplex celebrations (including octave days) in the general calendar. During the following centuries the number of these double feasts increased continuously since it became almost a rule to assign to every newly canonized saint a double celebration. Until the time of Pope Leo XIII no less than 104 such double feasts had been added to the general calendar of the Church.¹ On 275 days of the year celebrations of saints — feasts of first and second class, double feasts could replace the liturgy of Sunday.² This amounted to a quasi-abolition of the Sunday liturgy in favor of the celebration of saints.

First steps away from this unhealthy development were taken by Pope St. Pius X: from 1911 on all Sundays have precedence over double feasts. Only feasts of first and second class could take the place of a green Sunday. At the same time he gave to those celebrations of saints which had up to this time been assigned to certain Sundays of the year a fixed date in the month. In this way he doubled the number of Sundays which could be observed liturgically again, thus achieving — at least in part — his original aim that the green Sundays could be celebrated again.

The next decades of the twentieth century saw a renewed increase of saints' feasts of higher rank, especially under Pope Pius XI. Therefore, Pope John XXIII in his Code of Rubrics (1960) tried to take up again the work of Pius X. To the Sundays of Advent and Lent he gave the rank of first class.³ The post-conciliar reform of the general calendar added to them the Sundays of the Easter

¹ H. A. P. Schmidt, *Introductio in Liturgiam Occidentalem* (Romae, 1960) pp. 547-576.

² Noele M. Denis-Boulet, *The Christian Calendar* (Faith & Fact Book, 112) (London, 1960) p. 104.

³ Code of Rubrics, n. 91.

season. No celebration of a saint, not even those celebrated with the rank of solemnity, can now replace any one of these Sundays. A solemnity occasionally falling on one of these Sundays, like the Immaculate Conception (Dec. 8), or the solemnity of St. Joseph (March 19) have then to be transferred to the preceding Saturday.

According to the Church's general calendar of 1969 only solemnities can now take the place of an ordinary (green) Sunday. Why this general tendency? Vatican II in its Constitution on the Liturgy and further ecclesiastical documents give the answer.

A THEOLOGY OF SUNDAY

In line with the last book of the Bible, Vatican II calls the Sunday the "Day of the Lord" or "the Lord's Day".⁴ Sunday is the Lord's Day because of Christ's resurrection; it is the weekly Easter.⁵ The Council Fathers were convinced that the Church celebrates Sunday not because of some common agreement, not because of a mere ecclesiastical law that could be abolished, but because of a tradition handed down from the apostles, which took its origin from the very day of Christ's resurrection.

Consequently, the Christian Sunday has, from its very origin, the aspect of a memorial celebration: it celebrates the passage of Jesus from his earthly life through his passion and death to the new life of the resurrection; it celebrates the redeeming and liberating force of the paschal mystery which is now mentioned in five of the eight new Sunday prefaces.

Sunday has also an eschatological dimension: it looks toward the final revelation of the Lord, to the completion of the salvation brought to us in the paschal mystery. Intimately connected with this aspect is "the eighth day" as a Christian name for Sunday.⁷ It implies that Sunday has been taken out of the temporal order of the seven weekdays to signify that with the completion of the Lord's redeeming work the people of God have entered a new age and a new creation, giving them "the pledge of an eternal Easter."⁸

⁴ Constitution on the Liturgy, art. 106.

⁵ *Ibid.*, art. 102. — This is now forcefully stressed in the Liturgy of the Hours for Sundays, especially in Lauds and the Middle Hour. The concluding Prayer of Compline II prays: "Lord, we have celebrated today the mystery of the rising of Christ to new life."

⁶ *Ibid.*, art. 106.

⁷ *Ibid.*, art. 106.

⁸ Title of Sunday preface VI.

Sunday is, therefore, not only the Day of the Lord as Head, but equally the Day of the Lord's Body. The christological, soteriological and ecclesiological aspects of Sunday belong intimately together. On Sunday the glorified Lord wants to meet his people. He expressed this desire when on the first day of the week, on the day of the resurrection, he came to meet repeatedly his disciples (Jn. 20:19,26; Lk. 23:13; MK, 16:9). Recognizing this wish of their Lord the apostles gathered their own faithful on the first day of the week for the breaking of the bread (Acts 20:7, at Troas). Paul gave orders that on the first day of the week his Christians at Corinth should, on a regular basis, take up a collection for the poor of the mother church at Jerusalem (1 Cor. 16:1f), a collection that seemingly took place during a liturgical gathering. In view of this it is not to be wondered at that by the end of the first century the first day of the week had already a specifically Christian name (Apoc. 1:10). An ancient Christian catechism, the *Didache*, probably coming from about A.D. 100, prescribes: "Assemble on the Lord's Day, and break the bread and offer the eucharist".⁹

As conclusion of these premises Vatican II states that "Sunday is the original feast day"; it is the "foundation and kernel of the whole ecclesiastical year." We have to unfold in the Sunday Mass — because only here we can reach our people today — "within the cycle of a year the whole mystery of Christ from his incarnation and birth until his ascension," Pentecost and "to the expectation of the blessed hoped-for return of the Lord," and thus to make accessible to them "the riches of the Lord's powers and merits."¹⁰ Here we have the reason why "other celebrations, unless they be truly of the greatest importance" shall not have precedence over the Sunday.¹¹

On Sunday Christians come together not because of sociological and political reasons. This assertion does not mean that these and other petitions, e.g., ecclesiastical needs, themes and intentions could not be mentioned during Sunday celebrations. As a matter of fact, occasionally they have to be mentioned in the Sunday Mass. But they are and have to remain secondary themes and intentions in the course of the Sunday liturgy; they have to remain subordinated to it. They must not obscure the original meaning of the Sunday celebration and the eucharist. Here we have the reason why trini-

⁹ Early Christian Writings. The Apostolic Fathers. Translated by M. Staniforth (Penguin Books) Ch. 14, p. 234.

¹⁰ Const. on the Lit., art. 102.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, art. 106.

tarian thoughts and elements which had gradually entered the Sunday liturgy, e.g., the Athanasian Symbol in Prime in the Breviary and the preface of the Trinity (in 1759 under Pope Clement XIII), have been eliminated by the recent reform of the Liturgy.

It would be foolish to make a wedding celebration the occasion for a demonstration for the right of parents to educate their children against the attempts of civil authorities to undermine this right. Such a demonstration would destroy the wedding celebration. It would be equally wrong to make the Sunday liturgy the occasion for a propaganda drive to collect funds for certain ecclesiastical or civil purposes.

Therefore, the Church wants us to celebrate the Sunday liturgy as it has been prepared in her liturgical books. This certainly admits of exceptions. But they have to remain exceptions. They should never become the rule.

PRACTICAL "CONSEQUENCES"?

The General Norms for the Liturgical Year which accompanied the publication of the Church's general calendar in 1969 established as basic principle: "By its nature (*per se*) Sunday excludes the permanent assignment of another celebration" (n. 6). But after establishing this principle the same norms proceed right away to present the first exceptions of the rule: the feast of the Holy Family takes the place of the Sunday between Christmas and New Year. The celebration of the Sunday after the Lord's Epiphany is taken over by the feast of the Lord's Baptism. From the late Middle Ages on the Sunday after Pentecost yields to the solemnity of the Blessed Trinity. On the last Sunday of the ecclesiastical year the Church celebrates permanently the solemnity of Christ, the King of the Universe. These four feasts and solemnities of the universal calendar take the place of Sundays.

Further exceptions of the general rule were made in favor of those countries and regions where the Epiphany, the Ascension and Corpus Christi are no longer public holidays: these solemnities are transferred to the next Sunday.

Particular calendars (of countries, dioceses and religious orders) may raise the number of Sundays which are permanently replaced by other celebrations. In the Philippines the feast of the Santo Niño takes the place of the third Sunday of January, usually the second Sunday in ordinary time. Thus at least eight Sundays are regularly omitted in their liturgical celebration in favor of other

mysteries. An author has observed that now, after the reform of Vatican II we are worse off concerning the Sunday liturgy than after the reform of Pope St. Pius X in 1911.¹²

Another general principle of the universal calendar has to be taken into consideration. Feasts of the Lord in the general calendar "which fall on Sundays in ordinary time" take the place of the Sunday liturgy.¹³ As a consequence of this principle, in 1980 the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (Sept. 14) replaces the twenty-fourth Sunday in the ordinary time and the Dedication of the Lateran Basilica (Nov. 9) the thirty-second Sunday. Accidentally the solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul (June 29) has precedence over the thirteenth Sunday and the Commemoration of all the Faithful Departed (Nov. 2), which is a day of first class, replaces the Sunday Masses of the thirty-first Sunday. Of the 52 Sundays of 1980 fourteen cannot be celebrated in the Mass formulary that is assigned to them in the Sacramentary and Lectionary.

Unfortunately, this is not yet the end. Every parish has its fiesta, the celebration of the patron saint (of the church or the place). Its external celebration usually replaces another Sunday in ordinary time (green Sundays).

THEMATIC OR TOPICAL SUNDAYS

In addition to this we have the so-called "topical",¹⁴ "thematic" or "special" Sundays which have similarly the tendency to replace the Sunday liturgy. Pope Paul VI established the World Day of Peace. In the Philippines the Sundays of Lent have been declared "Alay Kapwa" Sundays. For the whole Church Rome declared the fourth Easter Sunday, the so-called Good Shepherd Sunday, the day of prayers for priestly and religious vocations. Since this day usually falls in the great summer vacations, many dioceses establish their own vocation Sunday on another Sunday during the school year. According to the Ordo for the Philippines there is a Bible Sunday, a Filipino Tribal Sunday, a Fil-Mission Sunday (the last Sunday of July), a world communications day and a world mission Sunday.

Nobody will deny that all these are necessary and good topics and intentions which have to be brought to the attention of our faithful: the parish must be made aware of its social obligations,

¹² Ph. Harmoncourt, *Gesamtkirchliche und teilkirchliche Liturgie* (Freiburg-Basel-Wien, 1974) p. 122.

¹³ General Norms for the Liturgical Year, nn. 5 and 13.

¹⁴ J. A. Jungmann, *Pastoral Liturgy* (New York, 1962) p. 404.

of its responsibility for the foreign missions, of the need to have more and better priests and religious vocations, of the need to know the Bible and to read it regularly, and so on.

Unfortunately, there exists, especially after the second Vatican Council and the subsequent introduction of the mother tongue in the liturgy the tendency to subordinate the Sunday liturgy to the need of information and conscientization, and to the need for collecting funds for certain purposes. In order to achieve these aims these topical or special Sundays are sometimes even given new, self-made liturgical texts. Special readings are selected and proposed; new euchaological texts (opening prayer, prayer over the gifts, etc.) are composed and offered to the parishes in place of the Mass texts of the respective Sundays.

For 1975 and 1976 here appeared in two editions (one in mimeoform, the other in the *Liturgical Information Bulletin of the Philippines*) a "set of Masses for Lent." It had been planned and worked out "at the request of and in cooperation with Alay Kapwa and the groups preparing paraliturgical and catechetical materials for Alay Kapwa with the encouragement also of the Secretariat of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines."¹⁵ Since the presidential prayers of the Masses for the Sundays of Lent had hardly anything in common with the prayers of the Sacramentary, it had been planned that "these Masses would also be presented to the CBCP board for endorsement." Whether this had been done could not be ascertained. Anyhow, the professed aim of these new Mass texts was to "focus on one theme per Mass so as to enhance its impact" (*Ibid.*). Repeatedly it is stated that the introductions to the individual Mass formularies offer a "better selection" for a "stronger thematic unity."¹⁶

Here the Mass is seen from an exclusively catechetical and informational point of view. But the proposal forgot that the opening prayer still belongs to the introductory part of the Mass, which is the introduction to the whole Mass, not only to the service of the word of God. Generally speaking the prayers over the gifts and after communion are much less affected by the special mystery celebrated on a given day (e. g., on Christmas and Pentecost) Basic for the prayer over the gifts is the petition: Accept our gifts! The prayer after communion asks for the fruits of the Mass and of holy communion. They are not to give information or to make moral appeals.

¹⁵ *The Liturgical Information Bulletin of the Philippines* 10 (1975) 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 9, 22.

The modifications indicated resulted in a set of thematic Masses for some of the highest Sundays of the liturgical year, a set of Masses which have little to do with the spirit and aims of Lent. Here we have "thematic Masses," sometimes also called "motive" or "topical" Masses.¹⁷ Particularly the series of Masses for Lent 1976 have clear themes for the individual Sundays: "My transformation in Christ opens a new world for my neighbor" (Sunday II). "A renewed community can build structures of justice and love" (Sunday III). Where are here the true themes and aims of Lent? Characteristic for this season is, according to Vatican II the recalling of baptism or the preparation for it, and penance. "By means of them the Church prepares the faithful for the celebration of Easter."¹⁸ Unfortunately, these Alay Kapwa Masses make Lent subservient to certain purposes, to certain forms of social and political behavior.

The tendency to make the Sunday in this or similar ways thematic is not a new one. But until Vatican II and the subsequent period it had been confined to Protestantism, whose "Sundays are given over to special observances, Education Day, Family Day, and such like, which in traditional terms would be called Votives."¹⁹ Individual representatives of the Protestant Enlightenment went so far as to propose "to celebrate Christmas as the festival of birth, Easter as that of immortality, and to introduce other feasts of the Fatherland, Sanctity, Friendship, and so on."²⁰ The tendency to make Sunday subservient to certain intentions and themes is not a good one. At the basis of such efforts lies the failure to appreciate the true nature of the Sunday liturgy. Also the deficiency is not a new one. In times past it made possible the intrusion of saints' days. Thematic or topical Masses on Sundays are their modern substitutes.²¹

SOLUTIONS

How to proceed then? One solution to the problem, which, however is not always applicable, has been proposed by the late

¹⁷ A very critical reaction against thematic Masses came from A. Bugnini, the former Secretary of the Congregation for Divine Worship: "Messe a Tema," *Notitiae* 11 (1975) 350-352. — English translation in *National Bulletin on Liturgy* (Canada), No. 54, May-June 1976, 190-192.

¹⁸ Const. on the Lit., art. 109. — Cf. also the General Norms for the Liturgical Year, n. 27.

¹⁹ P. G. Cobb, in: Ch. Jones (e.d.), *The Study of Liturgy* (London, 1977) 406.

²⁰ J. A. Jungmann, *Pastoral Liturgy* (New York, 1962) p. 398, n. 26.

²¹ R. Nardone, "The Roman Calendar in Ecumenical Perspective," *Workshop*, 50 (1976) 239.

Fr. Jungmann.²² He prefers that for special intentions and needs days be chosen that will provide an appropriate background for the particular need. It seems that Rome has chosen the fourth Sunday of the Easter season as a day of prayer for priestly and religious vocations because of the readings of this Sunday: in all years Christ is presented here as the Good Shepherd.

Also when the proper Sunday Mass is taken in its entirety special topics and intentions can and should be mentioned in the introduction of the Mass, in the penitential rite if this be possible, in the homily, the general intercessions and after the postcommunion and before the concluding rite of the Mass. In other words: these themes and needs may be mentioned in those parts which are left to the free formulation of the celebrant. The homily seems to be, in this context, of primary importance. Its topics must not only be taken from the Mass readings. A homily may also be inspired by some text from the Ordinary (e.g., the Eucharistic Prayer) or the proper of the Mass. "The homilist should keep in mind the mystery that is being celebrated and the needs of the particular community."²³

CONCLUSION

St. Paul's decided to know nothing among his faithful "except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). According to him in the celebration of the eucharist we "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). It is also our aim and purpose when we come together to celebrate the Sunday Mass with our people to proclaim him as Savior and Redeemer. When we meet him on Sunday in word and sacrament he strengthens and renews our faith from which there is to result responsible activity in the world for both the Church and our fellow men.

²² J. A. Jungmann, *Pastoral Liturgy* (New York, 1962) 404.

²³ General Instruction of the Roman Missal, n. 41.