



## From A Bishop's Journal (673)

### The Christian Celebration of Sunday in Expectation of the Eucharist (1)

I am happy to share with you the pastoral letter that Bishop Jean Gagnon of Gaspé wrote for his flock, on the Christian celebration of Sunday. In this letter you will find in simple words a very profound reflection on the Eucharist and the Christian celebration of Sunday in expectation of the Eucharist.

#### Introduction

“The Church lives of the Eucharist. This truth is not only a daily expression of the faith, but it contains in its very essence the heart of the Church's mystery. The Church experiences with joy and in various ways the continued realization of the promise : ‘And I will be with you always, to the end of ages ‘ (Mt. 28:20). Those are the words of Pope John Paul II in the opening of his encyclical letter of Holy Thursday 2003 (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no 1). But what can be done on Sunday when a community is in a situation where the Eucharist cannot be celebrated ? In this letter, while I recall the meaning and importance of the Eucharist, I wish to provide orientations concerning Sunday liturgies of the Word.

#### The Meaning of Sunday

Faith in the Risen Christ invites all Christians to meet as brothers and sisters around the table of the Lord. From the very beginnings of the Church, they would come together on the first day of the week to celebrate the resurrection of the Lord and to await for his return. That first day came to be called *Dominica dies*, the Day of the Lord, which gradually became ‘Dimanche,’ in French. One can find in the Gospels mentions of those meetings of disciples on the first day of the week, as the Risen Lord appears to Mary Magdalen, to the disciples of Emmaus and, on some occasions, to the apostles gathered « on the eighth day », meaning, for the Jews, the day following Saturday. That Sunday gathering of the early Christians was first held in private homes, but it gradually became public, to the point that the Christians' Sunday was declared an official day of rest in most Christian countries. Although many expressions of this are still to be found, one must recognize that the observance of Sunday has changed noticeably over the past decades. For the majority among us, it has become simply a day off for recreation, and even a regular work day.

Despite this, the actual gathering of the community of disciples around the Risen Christ keeps its entire significance. How therefore, through the profound social changes of our times with its

secularization and pluralism, can we maintain the identity of the Christian community living in a specific place ? Here are some challenges facing today's Christians.

Faith cannot be lived in isolation. We have been saved through Jesus and have been marked by the Spirit as brothers and sisters, children of the same God and Father. That is why the gathering of a community called together by the Risen Lord is essential to the life of the Church. It is also for those outside a visible indication of its existence. That gathering on Sunday even points out, before the whole world, to the presence of a Christian community, just as the Sabbath indicates the existence of a Jewish community and the Ramadan, a Muslim presence. John Paul's apostolic letter *The Day of the Lord* (1998) describes beautifully the meaning of Sunday for the Christian conscience.

Gathered in prayer each week around the Risen Christ, his disciples seek to discover his will by listening to his Word. And through the pastor who presides in persona Christi, they make anew the gestures which actualize once more his sacrifice : "This is my Body [...] This cup is God's new Covenant, sealed with my Blood [...] do this in memory of me." (I Co. 11:24-25). The Eucharist is the source and the highest point of the Christian life. So that to celebrate Sunday is to celebrate the Eucharist.

### **The Sunday Liturgy of the Word**

When it is not possible to have the Eucharist, a Sunday Liturgy of the Word is the best way to bring Christians together and to maintain the observance of the Christian tradition on Sunday. That liturgy is a true expression of the existence of the Church of Jesus in a specific place. As the first disciples did, the faithful come together to listen to the teachings of Jesus on the mount, in synagogues or again in the Temple. They also meditate on the teachings of the prophets and the letters of the apostles, they pray and give thanks for the living presence of Jesus who walks with them and sends them to mission : "Go then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples..." (Mt. 28:19).

That celebration is generally called a *Sunday celebration in expectation of the Eucharist* because it expresses several types of expectation : expectation to celebrate the Eucharist which allows the people to give thanks to the Father through Christ's own offering, expectation to share the Body and Blood of the Lord, expectation of an ordained minister to come.

During a celebration in expectation of the Eucharist, the presence of the Risen Christ is not made actual through the sacrament of the bread and wine offered through the consecration, nor through the presence of a priest who acts in Christ's name, but through other modes such as the Word of God and the gathering of the faithful themselves who are in fact the Body of Christ. In this way the Lord's promise becomes fulfilled : "For where two or three come together in my name, I am there with them" (Mt. 18:20). Focussing on the Word of God that is proclaimed and open to all, as on the gift of Christ as the saving Word, the Sunday celebration in expectation of the Eucharist nourishes the heart and the mind and sanctifies the whole person. It also highlights the baptismal priestly function of Jesus' disciples and its requirements of brotherhood, service and Christian sharing."

+ François Thibodeau *in*

+ François Thibodeau, C.J.M.  
Bishop of Edmundston

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