

Question: What does it mean to keep holy the Sabbath day, and why does the Church consider it a mortal sin when we do not allow for the Sabbath to be a day of holiness?

Answer: “And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.” (Genesis 2:2-3) These are some of the first words written in our Bibles. God rested and made the seventh day holy. One of the most revered traditions of the Jewish faith has been observing the Sabbath day. Not only is this a day of rest and relaxation from the normal grind of work and toil, it is a day to give thanks to the Creator God for all that has been given to us. It is the day that God has set aside for us to give thanks, praise, and rejoice that we are in his steadfast love. Ancient Judaism took the command to observe the Sabbath day very seriously. Less of a choice and more of a command the Sabbath day was to be observed by order of God. The Sabbath became part of the Ten Commandments, “Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. The seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work.” (Exodus 20:8-10) It was also a day for the Israelites to remember and rejoice in the liberation from the bonds of the Egyptians. (Deuteronomy 5:15) During the development of early Judaism and according to the Mosaic Law given by God to Moses, anyone who did not keep the Sabbath holy could face the ultimate punishment of death, “because it (the Sabbath) is holy for you; everyone who profanes it shall be put to death...It is a sign forever between me (God) and the people of Israel that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed.” (Exodus 31:12-17) Clearly, the ancient Israelites did not take it lightly when one of their own violated the holiest of days.

Today, the question Christians may have in regard to the Sabbath day is that unlike Jewish tradition, we celebrate the Sabbath on the first day of the week instead of the seventh day. The Sabbath has traditionally been celebrated in Jewish tradition from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday. The Sabbath day has always been the seventh day because it is the day that God rested after creating the universe in Genesis. Christians today may wonder why we celebrate the Sabbath on Sunday the first day of the week. The reason is because Christ rose from the dead on Sunday, “But on the *first* day of the week, at early dawn they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body.” (Luke 24:1-3) With Christ’s rising on the first day of the week, the Christian’s responsibility towards observing the Sabbath continues, the only thing that has changed is the day in which it is observed. Sunday has become the Christian’s day to celebrate, to give thanks, and to rejoice in the goodness of God. St. Jerome wrote in the 5th century, “Sunday is the day of the Resurrection, it is the day of Christians, it is our day.” (*Dies Domini*) In a world where men and women are increasingly becoming immersed and obsessed with their work, Pope John Paul II felt the need to address the issue of the Sabbath and the responsibility for all Christians to observe it. The pope stated that while all the new responsibilities and commitments that families have are good in building community and friendships, if they take place on Sunday these tasks and events can take away from our primary responsibility of going to church. Sunday is a day to be kept holy. John Paul II felt that humanity in our busy ways was losing and forgetting the fundamental reason for the Sabbath day. To make his point clear, John Paul II distinguishes between “the weekend” and Sunday. He states that if we allow Sunday to become part of the weekend, we forget the fundamental importance it carries for all of us in our faiths. Sunday should be a day of celebration of what is holy. (*Dies Domini*) Being mindful of Sunday means more than observing it as a day of rest and relaxation, it means going to Church and being mindful of our faith in Christ. (*Dies Domini*) For nearly two thousand years Christian communities around the world have regarded Sunday as a day of holiness. Until recently, the day had been set aside from the strains of the work week for reverence and praise to God. The pope’s call was for us as modern Christians to be aware that while the attitude towards the Sabbath has been changed by the general public, the view Christians have of the Sabbath should continue to be the one observed by our Christian brothers and sisters for the past two thousand years.

The modern Church considers those who do not observe the Sunday Sabbath to be committing a mortal sin. Part of being a Catholic is the responsibility to attend Sunday (or Saturday evening) Mass. The primary reason for this is the Sunday Eucharist. Part of celebrating the Eucharist on Sunday is the fact that it is a testimony for all individuals attending that they claim to be a part of the faithful community in Christ. (*Catechism* 2181-2182) Those not observing the Sabbath and not attending this weekly momentous occasion are not only letting themselves down, but they are letting their Christian brothers and sisters down as well. Paul tells us that in Christ we are *one* body and we owe it to one another to be present to God’s holy mystery for support, and communion in faith and charity. (*Catechism* 2182)