

KEEPING THE LORD'S DAY

“As we begin to return to our public celebrations of Mass, I wish to invite all in our diocese to reflect more deeply on the value of Sunday, why God made it and what it means in the life of a disciple of Jesus Christ.”

-Bishop James V. Johnston, Jr.



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Pastoral Letter
on the Importance of Sunday
in the Life of Every Christian Disciple

Most Reverend James V. Johnston, Jr.

Cover Photo: *Bishop Johnston Celebrating Mass at The Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception*: Megan Marley, The Catholic Key

How to Use this Booklet

This booklet can be used for personal or group study.

In it, you will find reflection questions and concrete ideas for celebrating Sunday as a day of rest and rejuvenation, a day for worship of God at Mass and for connecting as a family.

This study guide contains three sections that may be used for a three-session study. Groups wishing to go deeper may wish to read and study Pope St. John Paul II's apostolic letter *Dies Domini*, referenced multiple times in *Keeping the Lord's Day*. These resources can be found at discipleshipkc.org/pastoral-letter-resources.

Scripture quotations in the study guide content are taken from the Revised Standard Version.

P.3: *On the Road to Emmaus*

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P. 5: *Celtic Cross*: Image by [https://pixabay.com/users/GDJ-](https://pixabay.com/users/GDJ-1086657/?utm_source=link-)

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P. 12: *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*

1628, by Jan Bruegel and Peter Paul Rubens.

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File:Christ_in_the_House_of_Martha_and_Mary_1628_Jan_Bruegel2_and_Rubens.jpg

P. 20: *The Last Supper*

by Vicente Juan Macip

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File:The_Last_Supper_by_Vicente_Juan_Macip.jpg

IDEAS FOR CELEBRATING SUNDAY

- ◆ Participate in activities that contribute to greater spirituality.
- ◆ Go to Mass, especially as a family. Dress well, like before the King of Kings. Arrive a few minutes early and stay a few minutes later to share personal time with God.
- ◆ Dedicate an hour on Sunday, outside of Mass, to prayer.
- ◆ Spend some time before the Blessed Sacrament.
- ◆ Pray the Rosary as a family.
- ◆ Dedicate time to read the Scriptures.
- ◆ Offer expressions of praise and thanksgiving to God.
- ◆ Make Sunday a special day for the family, something your children look forward to.
- ◆ Create Sunday traditions that children will remember when they grow up and have their own children.
- ◆ Share a special meal on Sundays. Set up the dinner table nicely. Pray before and after meals.
- ◆ Play cards or board games together.
- ◆ Take a Sunday walk as a family and enjoy the scenery.
- ◆ Sing together.
- ◆ Create craft activities together.



PART I: PILGRIMS ON THE WAY

Opening Prayer

From the collect of the Third Sunday of Easter. You may pray together.

May your people exult forever, O God, in renewed youthfulness of spirit, so that, rejoicing now in the restored glory of our adoption, we may look forward in confident hope to the rejoicing of the day of resurrection.

Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

The Gospel for Part I is taken from the Readings for Mass for the Third Sunday of Easter.

Luke 24:13-35 The Road to Emmaus

That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What is this conversation which you are holding with each other as you walk?" And they stood still, looking sad.

Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?"

And he said to them, "What things?" And they said to him, "Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since this happened. Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning and did not find his body; and they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb, and found it just as the women had said; but him they did not see."

And he said to them, "O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the

Part III: Reflection & Discussion

- 1. How can you and your family intentionally celebrate Sunday?**
 - By resting?**
 - Strengthening family relationships?**
 - By celebrating faith?**

- 2. Perhaps you or your family would like to develop a new tradition for celebrating Sunday well! Consider making a resolution or plan for a new (or renewed) practice:**

Closing Prayer

You may choose to engage in some intercessory prayer and close by saying an *Our Father*.

Conclusion

One final note. As we continue returning to the public celebration of Sunday Mass, all the faithful remain dispensed from the obligation to participate in Mass on Sunday due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This is especially important for those at risk among us so that no one feels one must return to Sunday Mass prematurely. I encourage the faithful to return as soon as one feels safe to do so and eventually, I hope that it will be possible to end this dispensation when we can all safely gather together again as One Family: Restored in Christ – Equipped for Mission.

One commodity we cannot save in life is time, which is why it is the most valuable of commodities. Sunday is sacred time gifted to us by God for tending to the most important things: God and others and ourselves. When we celebrate Sunday well, keeping God first, we keep life in right order, and when life is rightly ordered there is peace.

Let us all continue the journey we are on together as pilgrims traveling home to the Father's House in heaven, marking sacred time and making progress by celebrating our Sundays well.

Gratefully yours in Christ,

James V. Johnston, Jr.

Bishop of Kansas City-St. Joseph

+Pentecost - May 31, 2020

Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.

So they drew near to the village to which they were going. He appeared to be going further, but they constrained him, saying, "Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished out of their sight. They said to each other, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?"

And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven gathered together and those who were with them, who said, "The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread.



From *Keeping the Lord's Day*, Part III

This passage from the Acts of the Apostles is the earliest description of how to celebrate Sunday filled with Christ's grace. It describes the disciples celebrating the Holy Eucharist together, then exercising charity and sharing common life together around the dinner table. This is a fitting template for disciples today. In this final brief part of my letter I offer some observations on how we might try to devote ourselves to celebrating Sunday well and filled with grace.

First, eliminate the competition. By this, I mean taking inventory of what competes with our time and attention on Sunday. I invite each family, and each individual disciple, to examine their usual activities and approach to the Sunday Sabbath. We will likely identify good and wholesome things; and yet we might have allowed them, like invasive plants, to creep into the garden of Sunday. As your bishop, I desire to help, which is why I am mandating that our parishes and schools not schedule certain activities on Sundays commencing with the next school year.[12] This will entail changes, but the goal is to clear Sundays so that you and your families can tend to "the better part." Besides clearing away activities, families might also exercise some form of screen-time fasting by putting away digital devices to ensure that this day of the week is not undermined by the distractions and isolating effects which so often come with this technology.

Second, be more intentional about how you celebrate Sunday, beginning with Sunday Mass. I am fascinated by the amount of effort we put into preparing for most big events. Take a Chiefs game for an example among many. Fans do not simply go to the game. They talk about it all week. They dress for the occasion.

From Bishop's pastoral letter, *Keeping the Lord's Day*

Introduction

Why write a letter on the importance of Sunday? I had been thinking about the importance of Sunday well before the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, I had resolved to write this letter as we ended our diocesan Holy Year in January. But like many of you, during these past few months of the pandemic I have had time to think and reflect even more about what is truly important in life. Evidently, many other people have been doing the same. A recent syndicated column in the local newspaper[1] noted polling results indicating that Americans have become more religious during the pandemic, including those who had previously chosen not to identify with religion. It observed that prior to the pandemic, many of those who had rejected religion sought meaning in other things. Then this observation: "The pandemic has abruptly stripped many of those things away—work, routines, the frivolities of life—leaving us all to contemplate our role in the world and the purpose of our existence."

The old "normal" was disrupted and much of what we were used to was suddenly removed, including the ability to worship together on Sunday at Mass. Imposing these restrictions was a very painful decision for me to make as your bishop. I am grateful for the sacrifices you have made during this time, and for the efforts you have made to be spiritually present. But as we begin to return to our public celebrations of Mass, I wish to invite all in our diocese to reflect more deeply on the value of Sunday, why God made it and what it means in the life of a disciple of Jesus Christ.

This letter has three parts, each accompanied by a biblical story that illuminates the section's theme. I wish to reflect on how we might celebrate Sunday well as both a time to worship and as a time for rest and the renewal of relationships.

Part I: Pilgrims on the Way

The episode of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus in Saint Luke's Gospel sheds beautiful light upon the life of every disciple in every time and place. We are pilgrims on the way. Like those two disciples mentioned in the gospel, we too are distracted and slow to understand, sometimes oblivious to the fact that Christ is walking with us through all the peaks and valleys of life. In Saint Luke's account, these disciples came to recognize Christ's presence "in the breaking of the bread," a clear reference to the Holy Eucharist.

The image of pilgrimage is a fitting description of our own passage through life. A pilgrim is traveling, on the way to a holy place, a journey often marked by the unexpected. As disciples of Jesus, as soon as we are baptized, we are each set on the road to the "Father's house" in heaven (cf. Jn 14:2-4). That is our destination. Perseverance is needed. Companions are needed. Prayer and grace are needed. Our pilgrimage is a project of cooperation between us and God.

In Saint John's Gospel, Jesus declared, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me" (Jn 14:6). Here we see that not all roads lead to the Father's house—only one. Christ left us the Holy Eucharist—his very self—so that he could be our way home. For pilgrim disciples, the Sunday Eucharist is Jesus Christ. There, we encounter him in Word and

The Scripture reading for Part Three is taken from the Readings for Mass for the Second Sunday of Easter.

Acts 2: 42-47 The Church's Beginnings at Pentecost

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And fear came upon every soul; and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need.

And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Reflecting on the Church's Beginnings at Pentecost

- 1. Since the beginning, the Church has focused on apostolic teaching and a commitment to community/fellowship. How do these two aspects of Christian life contribute to the Church's growth?**
- 2. An important aspect of our Catholic faith is recognizing each other's spiritual and material needs and responding with generous hearts. Why is this an essential part of discipleship?**



PART III: WAYS TO CELEBRATE SUNDAY FILLED WITH GRACE

Opening Prayer

The Scripture reading for Part Three is taken from the Readings for Mass for the Second Sunday of Easter. You may pray together.

God of everlasting mercy, who in the very recurrence of the paschal feast kindle the faith of the people you have made your own, increase, we pray, the grace you have bestowed, that all may grasp and rightly understand in what font they have been washed, by whose Spirit they have been reborn, by whose Blood they have been redeemed.

Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Sacrament. We bring our needs, prayers, works, joys, and sufferings to be joined to the sacrifice during the Offertory. “The faithful are appointed by their baptismal character to Christian religious worship... Taking part in the eucharistic sacrifice, the source and summit of the Christian life, they offer the divine victim to God and themselves along with it.”[2]

In the Eucharist we receive his Body and Blood as “the bread that comes down from heaven so that one may eat it and not die” (Jn 6:50). He left this gift so that we could live in him and he in us as “branches” on “the vine” and that we might bear “much fruit” by becoming his disciples (cf. Jn 15:1-8).

One “fruit” that comes from being a disciple is bearing witness in such a way that one becomes a disciple maker. And you may recall that our diocesan pastoral plan, the Mutually Shared Vision, has as a top priority “Growing God’s Family” by making disciples. As Pope Francis highlights in his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, “anyone who has truly experienced God’s saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love.”[3] The disciples on the way to Emmaus show us that the source of discipleship is the Holy Eucharist. Once they encountered the risen Lord in the breaking of the bread, they hurried back to Jerusalem to bear witness to his resurrection.

In our worship together at Mass on Sunday, we truly go “through him and with him and in him” to the Father in the Holy Spirit[4]. In one sense, through Sunday worship at Mass, we go to heaven, the Father’s house, in Christ, even while we also remain here in time. This was also echoed at the Second Vatican Council in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy: “In the earthly liturgy we take

part in a foretaste of the heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the Holy City of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God, Minister of the holy of holies and of the true tabernacle.”[5] As Mass concludes we are then sent into the world to bear witness to the love of God in our words and our actions. Pilgrim disciples need Sunday and Sunday Mass to stay on the right way, to bear fruit along the way, and to get home to the Father’s house in heaven.

Reflection & Discussion

Bishop Johnston talks about the importance of celebrating Sunday Mass and how important it is that we prepare for this special day.

Before Sunday and in preparation for Sunday you might:

- ◆ Clean and straighten the house, fuel the car, prepare clothes, do shopping, etc.
- ◆ Buy or cut fresh flowers on Saturday to decorate the house during the week.
- ◆ Prepare Sunday meals in advance if possible.
- ◆ Go to bed at a reasonable hour on Saturday night to avoid feeling tired on Sunday morning.
- ◆ Read Sunday readings and discuss as a family.

no sin in cases where one is truly unable to participate in Mass. In her pastoral concern, the Church commits to ensuring, “that, in the normal course of life, none of her children are deprived of the rich outpouring of grace which the celebration of the Lord’s Day brings.”[11]

I wholeheartedly extend a special invitation to those who may have been away from Mass for some time. Come home. Return to the family of families that is your parish church. You are missed and you have a place among us.

Reflection & Discussion

- 1. Is Sunday just a part of your weekend?**
- 2. By looking closely at Sunday, how could it help you feel less disconnected and/or isolated?**
- 3. What have you discovered during this time of "stay home" that you would like to continue when things return to normal?**

Closing Prayer

You may choose to engage in some intercessory prayer and close by saying an *Our Father*.

A Word about “Sunday Obligation”

Most of us learned along the way that there is a grave obligation attached to participating in Sunday Mass (and Holy Days of Obligation). This stems in part from the 3rd Commandment. When God commands something, we should take it seriously. If he gives us the road map to the Father’s house, we do well to follow it! God does not want to lose any of his children.

But the obligation is also from our Mother, the Church, who wants to keep all her children safe and sound and on the road to heaven too. Not long ago I observed an exchange within a family who went to the lake for a getaway. Many of the children, good swimmers, wanted to go out on the lake without a life jacket. The mother insisted—no life jacket, no lake! It was an obligation she imposed to keep them safe. The Sunday obligation imposed upon us by God our Father and the Church our Mother is not given as a burden, but as a blessing, something to help keep us from drifting away from the One who is our salvation and our life. One of the tendencies of our fallen human nature is to become half-hearted about important things. That is why we attach vows, promises and obligations to the most important things in life, to make sure we do not neglect them.

Pope Saint John Paul II observed that, “The pressures of today can make it harder to fulfill the Sunday obligation; and, with a mother’s sensitivity, the Church looks to the circumstances of each of her children.” Of course, many Catholics work on Sundays. Our society depends upon medical professionals, first responders, and so many others to labor on Sunday. Some who work on the Sabbath day are able to participate in Mass (Saturday Vigil or late Sunday) even amid a demanding schedule, and some find it impossible. There is

Questions for Reflection

- 1. Have you become distracted in your spiritual journey? In what way(s)?**
- 2. Are there times when you have felt distanced from God, failing to recognize Jesus waiting alongside as you travel on the way?**
- 3. How might a renewed appreciation and commitment to Sunday Mass help?**

Closing Prayer

You may choose to engage in some intercessory prayer and close by saying an *Our Father*.



PART II: THE VALUE OF SUNDAY CELEBRATED WELL

Opening Prayer

*From the collect of the Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time.
You may pray together.*

Show favor, O Lord, to your servants and mercifully increase the gifts of your grace, that, made fervent in hope, faith, and charity, they may be ever watchful in keeping your commands.

Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

Another phenomenon of modern life increasingly shaped by new technology is disintegration. We experience disintegration when the various parts of our life feel disconnected and scattered. We all feel this way at times. We sense that we are always playing catch-up, looking for something beyond our grasp, seeking peace. Not finding it, we turn to things we hope will help us keep life together, sometimes ending up worse off as a result. Pope Francis described this well: “Sometimes we prove hard of heart and mind; we are forgetful, distracted and carried away by the limitless possibilities for consumption and distraction offered by contemporary society. This leads to a kind of alienation”.^[9] The opposite of this disintegration and alienation is a unity of purpose in which we seek the same ultimate good in every area of our life.

One of the remedies God provides for this disintegration is Sunday. Again, we realize this most profoundly at the Sunday Mass, which “is the privileged place of unity: it is the setting for the sacramentum unitatis [sacrament of unity] which profoundly marks the Church as a people gathered ‘by’ and ‘in’ the unity of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”^[10] Ideally, this unity experienced in the liturgy helps us to integrate ourselves and our relationships, especially those of the family. That is why it is ideal for families to attend Mass together on Sundays if possible.

You may have noticed when a loved one dies, we often pray, “Eternal rest grant unto him/her, O Lord ...”. Sunday rest is meant to prepare us not only for the Lord’s Day which comes every week, but for the Lord’s Day which will have no end. Like worship, resting in God will be part and parcel to eternity in heaven. Sunday helps us practice both now.

for walks and having substantial talks with their children; things that had been crowded out before. Life slowed down, and the hyper-activity within many families changed. Events, schedules, activities, games, and practices were postponed and cancelled. After mourning the loss of many good things, families were presented with a choice: to lose themselves with distractions and isolating activities, or become, like Mary in Bethany, present to each other in a new way—and in doing so rediscover “the better part.” This is what Sunday is for; being present to one another, especially in the home and around the table. As the altar is the Eucharistic table for God’s family, the Church, the dinner table is for the domestic church, the family.

God wants us to have the blessing of setting aside our busy-ness and noticing—noticing the beauty of Creation and the One who brought it into being, noticing Jesus, who gave himself for us and our salvation, and noticing the important people he has placed in our lives, so that we can be renewed by our friendships and deepen them. This requires that we slow down, look into one another’s eyes, and open our ears to listen to the hopes, dreams, disappointments, and sufferings of our loved ones.

Importantly, Sunday is also set aside for noticing those who are often overlooked—the poor. This day is set aside for us to perform acts of charity, works of mercy, or some other Christian apostolate. And what better time to serve others in charity than after we have experienced God’s love poured out for us at Sunday Mass? As Pope Saint John Paul II noted, “Time given to Christ is never time lost, but is rather time gained, so that our relationships and indeed our whole life may become more profoundly human.”[8] Sundays celebrated well make us more human and, I might add, more happy.

The Gospel for Part Two is taken from the Readings for Mass for the Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time.

Luke 10: 38–42 Jesus’ Visit in the Home of Mary and Martha

Now as they went on their way, he entered a village; and a woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving; and she went to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me."

But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her."

Reflecting on Jesus’ Visit in the Home of Mary and Martha

Luke 10:38-42

- 1. Jesus has an urgent mission and little time to spare in his brief, three years of public ministry. Why do you think that Jesus stopped here to rest and visit with his friends?**
- 2. What was it that Jesus observed in Mary that was so worthy of praise?**

From *Keeping the Lord's Day*, Part II

This episode recounted in Saint Luke's Gospel highlights something beautifully profound: that Jesus loved and found it necessary to get away to be renewed by friends and to rest and recreate with them. He did that at Bethany. Bethany was a special place for Jesus. He loved Martha and Mary and their brother, Lazarus, and he enjoyed spending time with them. Truly God and truly man, Jesus needed and loved friends. In becoming human he also allowed himself to fully experience being spent, exhausted from his mission. He often went off by himself to pray, but he also went off to be renewed with friends. And it was here that he also highlighted the high value of rest and relationship in the behavior of Mary and Martha, urging the latter to invest in "the better part." Bethany, therefore, is a good symbol for Sunday.

What was it that Jesus observed in Mary that was so worthy of praise? All she did was stop what she was doing and make herself present to him. Unlike Martha, Mary focused on the person rather than the thing or the activity, and persons take priority over things.

Sunday is a gift from God for rest and relationship. Part of that entails divine worship—our living relationship of communion with God as was noted in Part I; but worship of God is joined to rest.

Sunday rest is not merely taking a good nap at the halftime of a Chiefs game! To understand Sunday rest properly, we must refer to the Bible. Note that the foundation comes from the commandments revealed by God in the Book of Exodus:

"Remember the sabbath day—keep it holy. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them; but on the seventh day he rested. That is why the LORD has blessed the

sabbath day and made it holy." (Ex 20: 8, 11).

Commenting on this passage, Pope Saint John Paul II wrote in his apostolic letter on the Lord's Day, *Dies Domini*: "Before decreeing that something be done, the commandment urges that something be remembered. It is a call to awaken remembrance of the grand and fundamental work of God, which is creation, a remembrance which must inspire the entire religious life of man and then fill the day on which man is called to rest. Rest therefore acquires a sacred value: the faithful are called to rest not only as God rested, but to rest in the Lord, bringing the entire creation to him, in praise and thanksgiving, intimate as a child and friendly as a spouse." [6] Worship and rest are closely joined together on Sunday.

It is only in recent times that the specialness of Sunday, as being dedicated to keeping our lives rightly ordered, has been obscured. Rather than being a special day with a special purpose, it has become for many now simply part of "the weekend." Again, Pope Saint John Paul II noted the pitfalls of this recent trend: "Unfortunately, when Sunday loses its fundamental meaning and becomes merely part of a 'weekend,' it can happen that people stay locked within a horizon so limited that they can no longer see 'the heavens.'" [7]

Without celebrating Sunday well, we miss not only the heavens, but also the most important parts of our lives on earth. One of the blessings to come out of this unusual time of "sheltering in place," with both work and school operating on sporadic hours, has been the epiphany that many have experienced within their own homes and their own families, the "domestic church." Many parents have shared with me that they have come to learn and discover more about their children during this time. I have heard of parents going