

## THE OBLIGATION TO ATTEND MASS ON SUNDAYS - Part 1

The moral obligation to participate in the eucharistic sacrifice on Sunday's dates from the very beginning of Christianity, although it did not become a definite law of the Church until the fourth century.

*The obligation to attend Sunday Mass exists. It is a commandment of the Church which binds under the penalty of grave sin. It exists for a specific reason and should be known and loved, so that the soul feels a need to fulfill it. The fact that it is a law helps to create a religious consciousness of this need, which, in turn, makes it easier to fulfill the obligation.*

### **The Day of The Lord**

The Second Vatican Council reminds us that "apostolic tradition of the Church is, from the very day of the resurrection of Christ, to celebrate the Pasch every eight days, on the day which is called the day of the Lord" ("Sacrosanctum Concilium", 106). Modern scientific investigation also proves that this custom is from the time of the apostles. The first mention of this is to be found in Sacred Scripture in St. Paul's first Epistle to the Corinthians, written in the year 57. The Apostle refers "to the first day of the week" (16, 1-2) as the most appropriate for the collection for the poorer communities. About two years later the Acts of the Apostles tell of the celebration of the eucharist in Troas: "on the first day of the week" (20, 7-8). Here we are given to understand that the celebration takes place in the evening or the night of the day before. This custom was observed in the Church until the last century and has been restored since the Council. From the foregoing it is clear that in Greece, Galatia, Bithynia, and consequently in Palestine and Syria, during the first half of the first century, the celebration of the eucharist on the first day of the week was a common establishment among Christian communities.

In Didache, 14, I the Sunday celebration seems obligatory: "On Sundays, get together and break the bread and give thanks, confessing your sins in order that your sacrifice may be pure." This testimony pertains to the second half of the first century. In the second century, St. Justin, writing to a pagan, gives us a striking description of Holy Mass being celebrated every Sunday, referred to by him as "dies solis"; and he goes on to explain that those who live in towns and villages attend this sacred assembly ("Apologia" I, 67). During the same period, we have Dionisius of Corinth speaking of the first day of the week as a "holy day" ("PG", 20, 388). From here on we can find numerous descriptions of the Sunday eucharist celebration and also of the Christians' obligation of participating in the same.

### **The Early Christians**

Nowadays facilities abound for us to fulfill the obligation of attending Mass on Sunday therewith enriching our spiritual life. In the case of the early Christians, both for those of Jewish and pagan origin, it entailed great sacrifices for them to attend the eucharist celebration, sometimes even the sacrifice of life itself. Thus, the deep-rooted meaning such an obligation had in their lives is very clear.

Pliny the Younger, the governor of Bithynia, in a letter addressed to the Emperor Trajan in the year 112 mentions that the arrested Christians "declared that the very fault they were accused of was gathering together" on a fixed day to sing a hymn to Christ who is God ("Epist". 10, 96). About 200 years later 31 men and 18 women were arrested in the same city and brought before the proconsul Anulinus in Carthage on the 12th of February in the year 304. According to the authentic "Acts" of their martyrdom, they maintained the following very impressive dialogue with the Roman proconsul:

—It is true that in your house you celebrated the meeting in spite of the edict of the Emperor?

—Yes, in my house we celebrated the day of the Lord.

—Why did you allow so many people to participate?

—Because they are my brothers and sisters and I couldn't refuse them.

—You should have refused them.

—No, I couldn't have done that because we had to celebrate the liturgy of the day of the Lord.

These martyrs of Bithynia have sometimes been referred to as "the martyrs of the Sunday celebration," and not without reason.

Through the writings of the Fathers of the Church, especially in that of St. Ignatius of Antioch, we can see the changes that took place in these Christians converted from Judaism. This saint, in his letter to the Magnesians says: "...they gave up keeping the Sabbath and began by living according to the Sunday celebration, the day in which a new life was born for us through the grace of the Lord and the merits of his death" (9, 1).