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The Sabbath Rediscovered

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of data about the “good old days,” one must pay one's money and make one's choice. One (this one) wonders about when these good old days were—the Rome of the Emperors Otto? Or of the Borgias? The France of the Sun King? The Irish nobility under the Brehon laws (which permitted multiple wives)?

Or rural Europe for a millennium, when abortion and infanticide were the traditional means of population control?

Or Paris in the last century, where it was alleged that 70,000 infant bodies were cast into the sewers every year?

One does not take sin lightly merely because one asserts that it is not new.

The data suggest to me two brief concluding reflections:

1) The notion that all distinctively Catholic sexual morality would collapse once Catholics accepted the “contraceptive mentality” of birth control is not confirmed. Quite the contrary, a distinctive Catholic sexual morality—not completely different but still different—persists. Wise leadership might want to build on the consent that actually exists instead of denouncing the dissent that coexists. Such leaders would try to present the sexual teaching of the church in reasonable and persuasive terms rather than merely appealing to authority. They would try to reinforce those Catholics who adhere to their moral and religious norms despite enormous pressure. They would try to reassure them that they are not weird because they are different. They might even want to support the notion that pious Catholic virgins (of either gender) are not necessarily obsolescent.

2) While almost half the Catholic women in the National Longitudinal Study sample attended church services regularly in 1982, only a fifth of those who had abortions did so. There may be much healing which can and should be done.

The picture presented in this analysis is gray. Unfortunately for those who like sharper pictures, reality tends to be gray.

On Friday afternoon, as they watched the sky aglow with color and shadows, they sensed the greatness of the Creator.

The Sabbath Rediscovered

By THOMAS HICKS

Being somewhere not far from 60, I feel I know less than ever before. “Enthusiastic” words enthuse less than they used to, and “profound” thoughts often seem hard to endure. So much seems familiar and somewhat hopeless.

Still, I also find I have regained some elemental excitement. For example, I have an amazed appreciation of the physical world with its bold simplicities: all the loveliness around us that goes on and on, whether we look at it or not—that “splendid waste.” I relate to the line that says “Now at sixty what I see stops my heart in ecstasy. God, the wonders that there are.”

Along with this renewed, insistent love of the plain world comes a renewed appreciation of values that underlie the observance of the Sabbath. The two clearly connect in my mind. I have been influenced by the writings of

Abraham Heschel and the insights and practices of certain 16th-century Jewish rabbis known as the Safed Kabbalists, who developed a rich body of lore and ritual that articulates a vision of the Sabbath very different from the view I grew up with. I learned to identify the Sabbath with public worship and, to a lesser degree, with prohibitions against work. Study of the Sabbath involved legalistic debates about what defines work. In my earlier days Sabbath-keeping was more a burden than a joy, a technique for fulfilling a commandment that prevented me from doing what I might otherwise want to do. But the Jewish Oneg Shabbat, the joy of the Sabbath, generally eluded me. Lately, my efforts to celebrate a more meaningful Sabbath revolve around some motifs rediscovered from the Jewish tradition.

The clearest meaning of the Sabbath is a memorial of the creation (Ex. 20:11). It calls us to execute the ancient biblical function of praise. The Kabbalist rabbis pointed out that the Sabbath is no time to remember sins, to confess, to pray for relief or anything we might need. It is not a day for petitions, it is a day of praise for the marvel of existence—a time to observe, to get up, go out, look

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keenly at everything so that creation does not play to an empty house.

On Friday afternoon, just before sunset, members of the Kabbalists would go out to the fields and hills to greet the incoming Sabbath. They would stand facing west as the sun receded from view, and as they watched the sky aglow with color and shadows, they sensed the greatness of the Creator and would sing Psalm 29.

I rise early on Sunday to experience that particular hush, that indescribable pause, suspense, that comes just before the break of day. In that thrilling darkness one feels the promise, and in the magical first light of day, when the first charcoal smudges the sky, one can rediscover the great earth and sense the heavenly favor, like a smile. One can then stay in touch with the rhythm of the day, the passing of time. In an image of extraordinary depth, Abraham Heschel describes the Sabbath as a cathedral made not with stones and glass, but with hours and minutes. It is a celebration of time, that marvel of creation that measures our lives. We are to remain observant of the different tinctures of light and vapor peculiar to the hours as the day moves from first flush of light to that special late afternoon slant of the sun, to the encroaching dusk when the day gathers itself in, to the hush and sorrow of the conquering darkness.

The second great meaning of the Sabbath is a day set apart from other days of the week (Ex. 20:9-10; Dt. 5:13). Weekly routines are to be put aside. The Sabbath invites us to seek rest and succor, to draw back and enter into a relaxed presence in the here and now. The Sabbath is not for the purpose of enhancing the efficiency of work. The Kabbalists maintained that even thinking of business or labor should be avoided.

IDEALLY, the Sabbath is a day of freedom, a day of independence of external obligations (I try to attend Mass on Saturday). It is to be thought of as a day at one's disposal, not a day to be confined and constrained. Contemporary social patterns fit those of ancient Near East peoples, who would suspend normal labor to provide Market Days when the people were free to shop. I try to follow Nehemiah (13:15-21), who expressly forbade the profanation of the Mosaic Sabbath by economic activity, including marketing. By having the Sunday papers delivered, I even strive to follow the Kabbalistic advice to make the Sabbath a day on which one uses no money, the world's chief idol.

The study of Scripture is to have a place in the observance of the Sabbath, as is some contact with music and art. Things the Kabbalists say about our obligation to beauty, to music and art, echo Dante's vivid definition of art as "almost God's grandchild."

Comfort and pleasure are an integral part of the Sabbath observance. As the Kabbalists see it, we sanctify the Sabbath by choice meals, an afternoon nap, and marital intercourse is highly recommended on the Sabbath. Fast-