



Small Group Study Guide for Dies Domini: On Keeping the Lord's Day Holy

On the feast of Pentecost 1998, the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II published the Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini*, Keeping the Lord's Day Holy. In the introduction to this wonderful treatment of the Lord's Day, the pope expressed three hopes:

- *That this document would help to recover the deep doctrinal foundations of the Church's precepts so that the abiding value of Sunday in Christian life will be clear to all the faithful.*
- *That the age-old tradition and teaching of the Church would be renewed so that Christian believers should come together to hear God's Word and share in the Eucharist.*
- *That Sunday would again be at the heart of Christian life so that we may live the demands of faith to the full and respond concretely to the deepest human longing.*

If Sunday is the "very heart of Christian life," then the celebration of the Eucharist is the very heart of Sunday. The Eucharist is the celebration of the living presence of the Risen Lord in the midst of his own people. The Eucharist is the "fountainhead" of the Church; it feeds and forms the Church.

This study guide, based on the document *Dies Domini* is offered to parishes and other ecclesial communities as a way to assist with a formative and reflective opportunity in observance of the Archdiocese of Chicago Strategic Pastoral Plan Year of Sunday Mass.

Suggestions for Use in Small Study Groups

Identifying Roles

Each group should identify a leader. The leader is responsible for:

- *directing the discussion according to the study guide questions*
- *encouraging each participant to contribute to the discussion that results from the study questions*
- *leading prayer at the beginning and end of each session*

The individual group members are responsible for:

- *reading the predetermined sections of *Dies Domini* and the related discussion/study questions*
- *spending time before the session in prayer and reflection on the discussion/study questions*
- *contributing to the discussion during the session*

Leading Prayer

The following format is given as a model for prayer at each session:

1. Hymn (choose something that the people in your group know well, such as a hymn that you sing often at Sunday Mass)
2. Sign of the Cross
3. Opening Prayer (this is a short prayer thanking God for giving you the opportunity to gather and learn together, and asking his blessing on your work)
4. Scripture reading (choose a reading from the previous or coming Sunday, or a reading quoted in the section of *Dies Domini* that you will be discussing)
5. Silence
6. Intercessions
7. Lord's Prayer
8. Closing Prayer (this is a short prayer asking God to bless your group with his peace and help you to live your lives according to what you have learned and discussed together)
9. Sign of the Cross

Housekeeping

Be sure to give people time to review their materials before beginning discussion.

Allow time for people to introduce themselves to the group during your first session, and if you have new members joining you.

Sessions

The following study guide can easily be divided into six sessions: the Introduction, Chapter One, Chapter Two, Chapter Three, Chapter Four, and Chapter Five and the Conclusion (Chapter Five and the Conclusion can be discussed in one session together).

After your final session, you may want to make a plan to attend a Sunday celebration of the Eucharist at your parish together, and then gather afterward, perhaps over breakfast, to share any further thoughts, insights or reflections.

If you use this study guide during Lent, you might let your experience culminate in the liturgies of the Triduum (Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil). Plan on attending these liturgies together as a group.

***Dies Domini* Study Guide**

Introduction (paragraphs 1–7)

In the introduction to his letter, the pope expresses his hopes (noted above) and his concerns. In the five chapters that follow, he develops these themes and at the same time presents a rich theological mosaic of the Day of the Lord (he uses at least 25 different images to describe Sunday), and of the nature of the Church as it celebrates the Lord's Day and lives out its Eucharistic mission in the world.

The pope quotes St. Jerome, calling Sunday “the fundamental feastday” (2).

How do you experience this feast?

What kinds of things do you do to observe Sunday?

The pope notes a change in regard to Sunday in many societies. While some Christians still keep the Lord's day holy, there are many things in society that distract people from observing Sunday.

How have you seen a change the celebration of Sunday over the years?

How do you see structures in society either supporting or not supporting the Christian observance of Sunday?

Is it easy or difficult for you to “rest” on Sunday?

Chapter One: *Dies Domini*, The Celebration of the Creator's Work (paragraphs 8–18)

“In order to grasp fully the meaning of Sunday, therefore, we must re-read the great story of creation and deepen our understanding of the theology of the Sabbath” (8).

Major themes in this chapter:

- *the Creator's work*
- *our work as co-creators*
- *we rest from work and deepen our relationship with God*
- *remembering all of God's actions and promises leads us to thank and praise him*

The pope cites the first pages of Scripture, writing about the story of creation. Read this story in its entirety (Genesis 1:1—2:4).

- *What stands out to you most in this story?*
- *The pope notes that the act of creation, God's work, makes all work potentially holy. Do you regard your work as holy? Why or why not?*

The pope uses beautiful, poetic imagery to describe God's rest on the final day. He talks about God "lingering before" what he has created, and looking upon it with "a gaze of joyous delight" (11). He talks about God as the Bridegroom, anticipating "the nuptial shape of the relationship which God wants to establish with the creature made in his own image" (11).

- *What thoughts or feelings do these images of God evoke in you?*
- *How do you respond to each of these images? Does one strike you more than the others?*

John Paul II notes that Sunday is the "day par excellence" (76) for our relationship with God. It is a day of explicit prayer, "in which the relationship becomes an intense dialogue" with God (15). Sunday is the day for remembering all the good that God has done (16).

- *What powerful and liberating acts of God have occurred in your own life? Do you remember these things on Sunday?*
- *How might you be more conscious of the holiness of your work?*
- *How might you be more conscious of the holiness of your rest from work on Sunday?*

Chapter Two: *Dies Christi*, the Day of the Risen Lord and the Gift of the Holy Spirit (paragraphs 19–30)

"It is clear that, although the Lord's Day is rooted in the very work of creation and even more in the mystery of the biblical 'rest' of God, it is nonetheless to the Resurrection of Christ that we must look in order to understand fully the Lord's Day. This is what the Christian Sunday does, leading the faithful each week to ponder and live the event of Easter, true source of the world's salvation" (19).

Major themes:

- *Sunday is the weekly Easter*
- *Christians are made a new creation through Baptism*
- *Sunday is a day of light and a day of fire, recalling Pentecost*
- *Sunday is the day of renewal of faith*

There are several Scripture stories cited in paragraphs 18-20 that relate to "the first day of the week" (21). Pick one of them and read the full story.

- *What new insight about Sunday did you discover from the passage you read?*

The pope notes that Sunday is the day to recall our Baptism, “which has made [us] new in Christ” (25).

- *Spend time reflecting upon your Baptism. Do you remember it? If not, what stories do you know about your Baptism? Do you have photos? Do you have the white garment in which you were clothed, or your baptismal candle?*
- *What connections do you see between the sacrament of Baptism and the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist?*

The pope also notes that Sunday is a foretaste of eternity (26).

- *What do you think is meant by the image of Sunday evoking “the age to come” (26)?*

The pope also calls Sunday a weekly Pentecost, when Christians receive the life-giving breath of the Spirit (28). Read the story of Pentecost in Acts 2:1-39.

- *What connections can you make between what we Catholics do on Sunday and what the Apostles experienced at Pentecost?*

In talking about Sunday as “the day of faith” (29), John Paul II notes the Creed, which we profess at every Sunday Eucharist.

- *Reflect on the words of the Creed. Which words or phrases speak to you the most? What does it renew you to do or to be?*
- *Pope Benedict XVI has instituted a Year of Faith, which will begin in October of 2012. In *Porta fidei*, his document introducing the Year of Faith, he reflects on how important it is for Catholics to know the Creed by heart. Have you taken the time to re-learn the words of the Creed by heart since the changes in wording with the adaption of the third edition of the Roman Missal? What difference do you think it makes to commit these words to memory?*

Chapter Three: *Dies Ecclesiae*, the Eucharistic Assembly: Heart of Sunday (paragraphs 31–54)

“For [the presence of the Risen Lord] to be properly proclaimed and lived, it is not enough that the disciples of Christ pray individually and commemorate the death and Resurrection of Christ inwardly, in the secrecy of their hearts. Those who have received the grace of baptism are not saved as individuals alone, but as members of the Mystical Body, having become part of the People of God. It is important therefore that they come together to express fully the very identity of the Church, the ekklesia, the assembly called together by the Risen Lord who offered his life ‘to reunite the scattered children of God’” (31).

Major themes:

- *the Eucharistic assembly*
- *the Eucharist feeds and forms the Church*

- *the Church is a pilgrim people*
- *the table of the Word and the table of the Body of Christ*
- *the Eucharist is a call to mission*
- *it is our duty to keep Sunday holy*

At the beginning of this chapter, the pope reminds us that no Christian is saved as an individual alone, but rather as a member of the Mystical Body of Christ, as a member of the Church.

- *Reflect on the various communities of which you are a member: your parish, your family, your neighborhood, your school or work, and so on. How does your faith influence your role and behavior in each of those communities?*
- *In what ways might you acknowledge and celebrate these various communities on Sunday?*
- *How can you take what you experience on Sunday and allow it to transform your behavior in each of these communities during the week?*

The pope emphasizes that the Sunday Eucharist is at the heart of the Church's life (32–33). Read these two paragraphs.

- *Do you think that these statements are true about our society today? Why or why not?*

Read the story of Emmaus (Luke 24).

- *In what ways is your own journey of faith similar to that of the two disciples?*
- *What people or situations in your life open your eyes and lead you to recognize Christ?*

The pope writes of the Church as community. He uses the family as an image of a parish gathering on Sunday. He notes that, “among the many activities of a parish, ‘none is as vital or as community-forming as the Sunday celebration of the Lord’s Day and his Eucharist’” (35). In paragraph 34, the pope writes that each parish community is connected to every other parish community in the mystery of the Church.

- *How is your family an image of your parish community, or an image of the broader Church?*
- *How does the Sunday Eucharist build the community of your own parish?*
- *In what ways do you experience life in your parish as connected to the Universal Church?*

In paragraph 38, the pope calls Sunday “the day of hope.” He recalls how every Sunday Mass points us toward the heavenly Jerusalem (37).

- *What are the major hopes in your life right now?*
- *How are these hopes influenced by your “Christian hope” and the “hope of faith”?*
- *How do you experience a foretaste of the heavenly banquet in your own experience of Mass?*
- *In what elements of the Eucharist do you see a glimpse of the heavenly liturgy?*

In writing about the Sunday Eucharistic assembly, the pope makes a point of writing about the Table of the Word (39–41). The reception of Jesus’s Body and Blood in the Eucharist is one experience of God that we have at Mass. Another is the experience of being spoken to by God in the Scripture during the Liturgy of the Word. The pope writes that the Liturgy of the Word is “a dialogue between God and his people” (41).

- *How do you keep in mind, during the Liturgy of the Word at Sunday Mass, that God himself is speaking to you?*
- *Do you do anything to prepare yourself to better listen to the Word of God on Sundays? What kinds of things might you do to prepare?*
- *How do you see the Liturgy of the Word as a dialogue between God and his people?*
- *Are you aware, during the Liturgy of the Word at Sunday Mass, that God himself is speaking to you? How might an awareness of that change your behavior at Mass?*
- *How do you take part in this dialogue between God and his people?*

In writing about the Liturgy of the Eucharist at Sunday Mass, the pope notes that the “whole community gathers to celebrate ‘the Lord’s Day’” (42).

- *What are the various aspects of this communal celebration?*
- *In what ways are you aware of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross that is made present through the Mass, and in which the whole community shares?*
- *In what ways do you “bring to the altar the week that has passed, with all its human burdens” (43)?*
- *In what ways are you aware that sharing in communion, especially at the Sunday Mass, is an “experience of brotherhood” (44)?*
- *How do you understand the pope’s statement that, “for the faithful, who have understood the meaning of what they have done [in participating in the Mass], the Eucharist does not stop at the church door” (48)?*
- *How do you understand the Mass as a call “to evangelize and bear witness in [your] daily life” (45)?*

Re-read paragraphs 46–49, which contain the Pope John Paul II’s reflection on the Sunday obligation.

- *How do you understand the precept to attend Mass on the Lord’s Day?*

Pope John Paul II notes that “if believers are not to be overwhelmed [by the indifference and unresponsiveness of society to the Gospel], they must be able to count on the support of the Christian community” (48).

- *How do you rely on the support of your parish community?*
- *How do you contribute to the support that your community is to others?*

In paragraph 52, Pope John Paul II writes that keeping Sunday holy involves shaping “the other moments of the day—those outside the liturgical context: family life, social relationships, moments of relaxation—in such a way that the peace and joy of the Risen Lord will emerge in the ordinary events of life.”

How does the peace and joy of Christ enter into your experience of these other moments of Sunday, outside of Mass?

How might you be more aware of Christ’s presence throughout Sunday in the time spent with family or friends, or relaxing?

How might you, in your parish or in your family, assist those who are sick or homebound in their experience of Sunday Mass?

Chapter Four: *Dies Hominis*, Sunday: Day of Joy, Rest, and Solidarity (paragraphs 53–73)

“Sunday, as a weekly echo of the first encounter with the Risen Lord, is unfailingly marked by the joy with which the disciples greeted the Master: ‘The disciples rejoiced to see the Lord’ (John 20:20) . . . The festive character of the Sunday Eucharist expresses the joy that Christ communicates to his Church through the gift of the Spirit. Joy is precisely one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit (cf. Romans 14:17; Galatians 5:22)” (56).

Major themes:

- *Christian joy and sacred rest are part of Sunday*
- *the Eucharist commits all disciples to live in solidarity with the poor*
- *Sunday is a great school for charity, justice, and peace, and is a day for works of mercy and love*

Pope John Paul II writes that Christian joy must fill everything that we do, especially what we do on Sunday (55–58).

- *How do you understand the concept of Christian joy?*

- *What role does Christian joy play in your life?*
- *In what aspects of your life do you need to be more aware of Christian joy?*

In paragraph 65, Pope John Paul II addresses the theme of “holy rest” on Sunday. He writes that it is sacred “because it is a way for men and women to withdraw from the sometimes excessively demanding cycle of earthly tasks in order to renew an awareness that everything is the work of God.” In this light, the pope calls our attention to those people who, for various reasons, experience work as oppressive, unjust, or exploitative.

- *How do you see the beauty of all that God has created in yourself and in the people around you?*
- *How do you see the beauty of God’s creation in your work?*
- *How do you refresh your spiritual energy?*
- *Have you ever experienced work as oppressive or unjust? Are you aware of situations around the world in which people work in intolerable conditions? How can we address this?*

In paragraphs 69–73, Pope John Paul II notes that Sunday should give Christians “an opportunity to devote themselves to works of mercy, charity, and apostolate” (69). He notes concrete examples, such as inviting lonely people to eat with you, visiting the sick, providing food for needy families, or spending a few hours volunteering.

- *In what other ways might parishes or small groups make the Lord’s Day “a more intense time of sharing . . . and charity” (72)?*
- *How does your family or parish observe Sunday as a day to be in solidarity with those who are poor or who suffer?*

Chapter Five: Dies Dierum, Sunday: the Primordial Feast, Revealing the Meaning of Time (paragraphs 74–80)

“In Christianity time has a fundamental importance. Within the dimension of time the world was created; within it the history of salvation unfolds, finding its culmination in the ‘fullness of time’ of the Incarnation, and its goal in the glorious return of the Son of God at the end of time. In Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, time becomes a dimension of God, who is himself eternal” (74).

Major themes:

- *Christ is the alpha and omega—the Lord of time*
- *Sunday is the weekly Easter, and is part of the rhythm of the annual liturgical cycle*
- *Pastoral attention must be given to the celebration of Sunday*

Writing of the annual cycle of the liturgical year, Pope John Paul II notes that the celebration of the Sunday Eucharist “emerges . . . as the natural model for understanding and celebrating the feast-days of the Liturgical Year, which are of such value...that the Church has chosen to emphasize their importance by making it obligatory for the faithful to attend Mass and to observe a time of rest” (79).

- *Do you celebrate the major feast days of the liturgical year with the same spirit and regularity that you exhibit in your celebration of Sunday Mass? Why or why not?*
- *Do you have a missalette, liturgical calendar, or some other means of learning which feasts days are being celebrated on each day of the year? How do you celebrate these days at home?*
- *What changes might you make in your life in order to enhance your observance of the major feasts of the liturgical year?*

In Chapter Five, Pope John Paul II also points to Sunday as a foretaste of the Parousia—the promised return of Christ in glory when the fulfillment of the reign of God will be complete and God will be all in all.

- *What elements of Sunday, in your parish and in other events of your life, help you to get a glimpse of the eternal Jerusalem, the heavenly celebration at the table of the Lamb?*

Conclusion (paragraphs 81–87)

“Sunday in a way becomes a synthesis of the Christian life and a condition for living it well . . . It is crucially important that all the faithful should be convinced that they cannot live their faith or share fully in the life of the Christian community unless they take part regularly in the Sunday Eucharistic assembly” (81).

John Paul II writes that the “observance of Sunday should be seen as a need rising from the depths of Christian life” (81).

- *What elements of your life make you feel a need for the Sunday Mass?*
- *How have you grown, through this study of *Dies Domini*, in your appreciation of Sunday as the Lord’s Day?*
- *What major insights have you gained through this study?*
- *What are the major challenges that you face as you resolve to observe the various parts of the Sunday Sabbath more fully?*
- *What elements of your faith life, communal life, and prayer life have been affirmed through your study of *Dies Domini*?*