

September 2011

Our Precious Oasis

The small Sabbaths we need to face the intense, urgent truth of our lives

Mr Casey was always courteous. He was the conductor on the bus that dropped me at Lisivigeen, near Killarney, for my first-ever holiday, eight miles from home. I was seven then. Our farmer friends were waiting at the crossroads. Mr Casey helped me down the three steps of the bus with my strapped and bulging suitcase. We waved him goodbye and set off across the fields for the farmhouse. No emperor ever rode more imperiously to his destiny in a golden chariot drawn by elegant thoroughbreds, to the music of the spheres, than I did, that evening, in a bumpy old cart behind a weary old donkey.

The euphoric bubble quickly burst. As I unpacked my bag I discovered, to my horror, that I had forgotten the Chef Sauce. Let me explain. Chef Sauce was my life. Without it I could no eat anything. Our small shop, in those Second World War days, stocked a very limited supply just for me. In my mind I could see those two squat bottles with the smiling chef on the front, still standing on the shelf at home. Eight miles each way, this time on a bicycle, was a long way for my kind host to go to collect my golden nectar.

Intense efforts were made, some decades ago, to canonise a very holy and zealous missionary. His cause was scuttled when the Devil's Advocate (a prosecutor figure whose job is to prove the candidate unworthy of such a distinction – a role, incidentally, that was recently made redundant by Pope John Paul II) discovered that he had once written home, in some panic, from pagan territories, for the pipe (his Irish dúidín) which he had forgotten to pack. His undoing was tobacco – mine will be, when the time comes, Chef Sauce.

The memory of my first holiday reminds me of the universal need for some kind of 'Sabbath time' in our lives: a time to withdraw from the relentless action of our routine commitments so as to understand better the nature of our daily treadmill; a stepping out of the parade so as to see it more clearly from a distance; a moment of difference in order to explore the sameness of the repetitions of our lives. Pope Benedict takes a holiday holiday of 'repose and reflection' in the Italian Alps. I like to think that the words vacation and Sabbath carry the hope of our holy time (kairos) transforming what we do in ordinary time (chronos).



It seems to me, that many Catholics are defining a new shape for acceptable church practice. There is a growing *sensus fidelium* concerning the regularity of Mass attendance. Many now worship, not every Sunday, but maybe once every two or three Sundays. There is, however, a very sound reason for the church's insistence on weekly attendance. This time of worship can be seen as a precious oasis to flavour the rest of our week with the true spice of life; a breather to explore the love and meaning at the heart of all that we are and do; a small Sabbath to reveal God's signature at the end of each page of our weekday pursuits.

The much-mentioned spiritual hunger of people today is not, I feel sure, for more religion or church activities. It is for contemplative space, for an inner freedom, for tastes and glimpses of their own elusive beauty. During a real vacation, a real sabbatical, we make room for dreaming, for rediscovering the kernel of our being, for playing safely with bare feet. If sin, in scripture, is about 'missing the mark' – something that happens when we follow misleading maps and unreliable compasses – then sabbath- time is for some re-routing, for some fairly urgent U-turns and for finding a way out of the many newly discovered cul-de sacs we have long been lost in.



In a Tablet article some years ago, the Benedictine Sister Joan Chittester pointed out that we have substituted more labour, hard play or work-out leisure for soul searching and reflection, for intimacy and awareness. Our culture turns the Sabbath into a race for escape, an opportunity for more addictions, a collection of distractions. We cannot stop to do much about anything.

We do not stop at all in fact. We work every day of the week and pack even more into the weekend, using it to mop up what spills over from the working week. We take the children to play in the park while we sit in the car to finish writing a weekly or monthly report.



The Sabbath has become catch-up time instead of reflection time. We have lost a sense of attention, of living in the present, of what the Buddhists call 'mindfulness'. No wonder we can come to the brink of human cloning and hardly notice it; that we can watch the oppression of half the human race and take it for granted; that we can allow our leaders to take us into an unjust and unnecessary war – one which we are already deeply regretting.

As well as holidays, Sundays and daily meditation-times, holy days of obligation are also meant to provide us with essential Sabbath-time. These days were intended to be an opportunity for remembering a different life rhythm, for resisting the relentless drive to overwork, for arresting the way that our daily routine takes over. 'If you don't live your life, your life will live you.' Such days are important because they keep us focused on a reality, a way of being that includes, but transcends, the usual patterns of days and weeks. They take us back to our

sources in God and remind us of our destiny in heaven. And, in between, they keep before us the comforting assurance that, whatever the mountains we have to climb, we are not alone, that our lives are permeated by the Holy Spirit.

Professor Eamon Duffy, in a Tablet article, railed against the powerful lobby that sought to abolish the few remaining holy days in the Catholic calendar. He admits that they are awkward and burdensome. They cause problems for the conscientious; they are ignored by the lax. However, he sees them as among the few witnesses against the relentless dominance of the economic in our lives. In them, the ancient rhythm of the Christian liturgical year breaks through, interrupting our restless routines and thereby giving a deeper meaning to the often-shallow business of living.

The inconvenient demands of holy days of obligation – forcing us to rearrange our routines at some cost to conscience and pleasure – are not, in fact, outmoded restraints on our liberty. They are exactly the opposite. They are important reminders of our human dignity and freedom, signs of another and greater timetable, a remembering of those eternal values that we truly believe in, but which get repeatedly submerged beneath the torrents of relentless functionality.

I am anxious to clarify that there is nothing dualistic about the emphasis on Sabbath-time. There is no inference that 'chronos' time is inferior to 'kairos' time. They are both endemic to the creative heart of God. But because, for all kinds of reasons – the main one being original sin – our gullible hearts are too easily led astray, there is a vital need for Sabbath-time, or, if you prefer, Eucharist-time, to realise the hidden worth and infinite value in what we often regard as the most ordinary and boring dimensions of the lives we live. God comes to us disguised as Weekdays.

