

The Law of No Unnecessary Work on the Lord's Day

By Richard Joseph Michael Ibranyi

It is a disciplinary law of the Catholic Church that Catholics and catechumens must not do unnecessary work on the Lord's Day and other holy days of obligation. The full extent of this law must be kept in believing nations, which during the New Covenant era are Catholic nations. However, in non-Catholic nations this law may be impossible to keep or can only be partially kept. The law of no work on the Sabbath was first given to the faithful Hebrews when they were able to keep it because they were under the temporal rule of faithful Hebrews, Moses and Aaron:

"I am the Lord thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage... Remember that thou keep holy the Sabbath Day [now the Lord's Day]. Six days shalt thou labor and shalt do all thy works. But on the seventh day [now the first day of the week] is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God: thou shalt do no work on it, thou nor thy son nor thy daughter nor thy manservant nor thy maidservant nor thy beast nor the stranger that is within thy gates." (Ex. 20:2, 8-10)

God did not give this law to the Hebrews when they were under Egyptian bondage because he knew that they would not be able to keep it. And thus God gave this law to them when they were free; that is, under the temporal rule of believers, such as Moses and Aaron.

The same applied to God's disciplinary law on circumcision in which he commanded that newborn males were to be circumcised on the eighth day under pain of mortal sin, excommunication, and death:

"This is my covenant which you shall observe, between me and you, and thy seed after thee: All the male kind of you shall be circumcised. And you shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, that it may be for a sign of the covenant between me and you. An infant of eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every man child in your generations: he that is born in the house, as well as the bought servant shall be circumcised, and whosoever is not of your stock. And my covenant shall be in your flesh for a perpetual covenant. The male, whose flesh of his foreskin shall not be circumcised, that soul shall be destroyed out of his people because he hath broken my covenant." (Gen. 17:10-14)

However, God suspended this law when the Israelites were wandering in the desert for forty years since it was not possible or practical for them to keep this law because they were always on the move:

"Now when all the kings of the Amorrhites, who dwelt beyond the Jordan westward, and all the kings of Chanaan, who possessed the places near the great sea, had heard that the Lord had dried up the waters of the Jordan before the children of Israel till they passed over, their heart failed them and there remained no spirit in them, fearing the coming in of the children of Israel. At that time the Lord said to Josue: Make thee knives of stone, and circumcise the second time the children of Israel. He did what the Lord had commanded, and he circumcised the children of Israel in the hill of the foreskins. Now this is the cause of the second circumcision: All the people that came out of Egypt that were males, all the men fit for war, died in the desert during the time of the long going about in the way. Now these were all circumcised. But the people that were born in the desert during the forty years of the journey in the wide wilderness were uncircumcised, till all they were consumed that had not heard the voice of the Lord, and to whom he had sworn before that he would not shew them the land flowing with milk and honey. The children of these succeeded in the place of their fathers and were circumcised by Josue, for they were uncircumcised even as they were born, and no one had circumcised them in the way. Now after they were all circumcised, they remained in the same place of the camp until they were healed." (Jos. 5:1-8)

Catholic Commentary on Jos. 5:2: “**Second time:** Not that such as had been circumcised before were to be circumcised again, but that they were now to renew and take up again the practice of circumcision which had been omitted during their 40 years’ sojourning in the wilderness by reason of their being always uncertain when they should be obliged to march. Some suppose it was disused because it was not then necessary to distinguish the Israelites from other nations. Either way, the covenant with God, of which circumcision was the seal, had been in the mean time suspended. But as the Israelites are no where blamed in Scripture on account of this omission, it seems that God dispensed them during the 38 years after they left Sinai, that the children might not be exposed to the evident danger of perishing, as the people knew not how soon the cloud would give notice for an immediate departure.”

Likewise, Catholics must obey the disciplinary law of no unnecessary work on the Lord’s Day and other holy days of obligation when possible, which is always the case in a Catholic nation; for if a Catholic nation does not uphold this law, it is not a Catholic nation. And likewise, Catholics are dispensed or exempted from obeying this disciplinary law when it is not possible to keep it, which can only happen in non-Catholic nations.

Unlike dogmatic laws, which cannot be changed, abolished, modified, or dispensed or exempted from because they deal with faith or morals, disciplinary laws do not deal with faith or morals and thus can be dispensed or exempted from.¹ Hence Catholics living in non-Catholic nations can be dispensed or exempted from obeying the law of no unnecessary work on the Lord’s Day and other holy days of obligation when it is not possible or practical to keep it.

To avoid excuses or arguments as to when it is or is not possible or practical to keep this law, a competent authority (when one is available) must make the decision and grant or refuse the dispensation. The hierarchy of competent authorities is as follows: a pope, national bishop, local bishop, priest, or religious superior. If none will be available in the foreseeable future, then Catholics can be exempted from obeying this law for a good reason by the law of epikeia.

When living in non-Catholic nations, the primary holy days of obligation on which Catholics must try to avoid doing unnecessary work are the Lord’s Days, Christmas, and Good 6th Weekday. However, Catholics must make a unified effort to get off from work on as many days of obligation as possible and put non-sinful forms of pressure on non-Catholic nations in order to hopefully make them concede. But if this fails, then Catholics can be dispensed or exempted from keeping the law of no unnecessary work on the Lord’s Day or any other day of obligation that they could not get off from work. But they must, if possible, attend Mass on these days either before or after work.

Some good reasons that would allow Catholics to be dispensed or exempted from the law of no unnecessary work on the Lord’s Day and other days of obligation in non-Catholic nations are as follows:

- If a Catholic would lose his job or business and not be able to get another of equal pay or prestige in which he would get off from work on all or more days of obligation:

For example, Catholics in the USA can play professional football and thus play on the Lord’s Day because they would not be able to find another job of playing football at equal pay that does not play games on the Lord’s Day.
- If a Catholic would be impoverished, imprisoned, or killed. While Catholics must die rather than violate dogmatic laws, they do not have to die in all cases for keeping disciplinary laws.

In non-Catholic nations, some things that you can do that do not violate the law of no unnecessary work on the Lord’s Day and other days of obligation are as follows:

¹ See *RJMI Topic Index: Exemptions from the Law*.

- You can eat at restaurants.
- You can watch official or league sports and attend official concerts or plays.

However, if you work in a restaurant or perform in these events because you have no other job at equal pay or prestige in which you would not have to violate the law, you would be exempt from the law in this case and thus not be guilty for doing unnecessary work on these days. Eating at a restaurant or watching these events is not the same thing since you are not working when doing so and thus are keeping the law of no unnecessary work on the Lord's Day and other days of obligation.

Necessary work is allowed on Lord's Days and other days of obligation

The law of no unnecessary work on the Lord's Day and other days of obligation does not ban necessary work. In Catholic nations or other nations which enforce the law banning unnecessary work on the Lord's Days and other days of obligation, necessary work can be done if it cannot be put off for another day, such as cooking, cleaning dishes, taking care of crops or animals, policing, firefighting, fighting in a war, doctoring, and nursing. Speaking to the Pharisees, Jesus said,

“Which of you shall have an ass or an ox fall into a pit and will not immediately draw him out on the sabbath day?” (Lk. 14:5)

“Jesus answered and said to them: One work I have done; and you all wonder: Therefore, Moses gave you circumcision (not because it is of Moses, but of the fathers) and on the sabbath day you circumcise a man. If a man receive circumcision on the sabbath day, that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry at me because I have healed the whole man on the sabbath day?” (Jn. 7:21-23)

Even though the Baltimore Catechism No. 4 is invalid and heretical, it teaches the truth in this regard:

Invalid and heretical Baltimore Catechism #4, 1891: Lesson 32:

“358 Q. What is forbidden by the Third Commandment? A. The Third Commandment forbids all unnecessary work and whatever else may hinder the due observance of the Lord's Day.

“360 Q. Are works on Sunday ever lawful? A. Works are lawful on Sunday when the honor of God, the good of our neighbor, or necessity requires them.

‘Honor of God’—for example, erecting an altar that could not be erected at another time, so that the people may hear Mass on that day.

‘Good of our neighbor’—such as reconstructing a broken bridge that must be used every day; or clearing away obstacles after a railroad accident, that trains may not be delayed.

‘Necessity’—firemen endeavoring to extinguish a fire, sailors working on a ship at sea, etc.”²

The following applies to Catholics living in Catholic nations and other nations that enforce the law of no unnecessary work on the Lord's Day and other days of obligation:

- You must attend Mass if possible.

² *An Explanation of the Baltimore Catechism of Christian Doctrine* (a.k.a. No. 4), Rev. Thomas L. Kinkead, Third Edition, Nihil Obstat: D. J. McMahon (Censor Librorum), Imprimatur: + Michael Augustine, Archbishop of New York, New York, September 5, 1891, Benzinger Brothers, 1892.

- If sickness prevents you from attending Mass, then you are dispensed from the obligation of attending Mass.
- You must not take up a good portion of the Holy Day by traveling unless an emergency or duty requires it . Under the Old Covenant, Jews were only allowed to travel a Sabbath Day's journey on the Sabbath Day. Any traveling that takes up more than a total of two hours a day is considered a long journey. Hence if it takes longer than two hours to attend and return from Mass, you are dispensed from the obligation of attending Mass. Note that the two-hour-travel range includes all traveling during the day, not just to and from Mass. However, you can take long trips the day before and after the Holy Day in order to be within the range of a Mass on the Holy Day but you are not obliged to do so.
- You must not go shopping for food or other items, even on the Internet, unless an emergency requires it.
- You must not work on your home or property (such as mowing the lawn, doing laundry, or cleaning the house) unless an emergency requires it.
- You can cook meals and clean dishes.
- You must take care of the daily needs of animals and plants that must be done every day for their survival or in emergencies, such as pulling an animal out of a pit.
- You can play recreational sports (such as basketball and softball) and games (such as cards and chess).
- You can perform in unofficial plays and unofficial concerts.
- You can watch movies and read books.
- You must work if your job is necessary for survival (such as fighting a war that cannot be avoided) or for the law, order, and health of society (such as the work of doctors, nurses, policemen, and firemen). However, if you have time to attend Mass either before or after war or work, then you are obliged to do so; if not, then you are dispensed from your obligation to attend Mass.

*For the glory of God, the honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the angels and saints,
and the salvation of men.*

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