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Sabbath, Contemplative Time, and Liturgical Listening

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Abstract: As we explore listening practices in global Catholicism, we have an opportunity to learn from spiritual traditions and their wisdom about stillness, receptivity, rest, and attention. This article focuses on Sabbath in dialogue with Jewish and Christian writings, particularly with regard to the dignity of work, sacred time, and receptive relationship to God and all of creation. Considering Catholic teachings on Sunday and Sabbath, I develop the idea of liturgical listening, arguing that the Eucharistic assembly can be a formative space for cultivating practices of listening together.

For Wendell Berry (1934–), American author, cultural critic, farmer, and environmentalist, Sunday morning walks in the woods of rural Kentucky were Sabbath practices, time to be still, to quiet. As he writes in his collection of "Sabbath poems":

> I go among trees and sit still.
> All my stirring becomes quiet
> around me like circles on water.
> My tasks lie in their places where I left them, asleep like cattle.

In the stillness and in this place, tasks slumbering, Berry is able to hear. Silence opens the sounds of what has not been heard—internal fear, but also his own voice, his long muted but quietly emerging "song": "*I hear my song at last, and I sing it.*"[1] Berry spends many Sunday mornings at church, but when the weather is good he is drawn to the sloping woodlands and finds the outdoors to be a particularly powerful space to practice Sabbath: "The idea of the sabbath gains in meaning as it is brought out-of-doors and into a place where nature's principles of self-sustaining wholeness and health are still evident."

[1] Wendell Berry, *This Day: Collected & New Sabbath Poems* (New York: Counterpoint, 2014), 7.

Walks in solitude enable him to perceive the organic weave of the "one fabric of creation."[2]

Howard Thurman (1899–1981), African American mystic, preacher, and mentor to civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., also loved trees. "The signature of God is all around me," Thurman writes, "in the rocks, in the trees, in the minds of men."[3] In "Mysticism and Social Change," Thurman recounts: "When I was a boy I was always driven to worship when I saw a storm come up on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean on the Florida coast. A stillness pervaded everything. The tall sea grass stood at attention."[4] That sense of stillness and attention imbedded in nature remained an important part of Thurman's spirituality. Amidst his public ministry and leadership, Thurman found it important to "center down," to "come to a point of rest, a place of pause."[5] In that place of pause, Thurman writes, we begin to listen and hear at a deeper level. Thurman describes this listening as a form of discernment, a sonic sifting among a multitude of competing sounds:

> The streets of our minds seethe with endless traffic;
> Our spirits resound with clashing, with noisy silences,
> While something deep within hungers and thirsts for the still moment and the resting lull . . .
> As we listen, floating up through all the jangling echoes of our turbulence, there is a sound of another kind—
> A deeper note which only the stillness of the heart makes clear.[6]

Like Berry, Thurman seeks an inner stillness that opens space to hear. It is not only external noise that crowds out the deeper note but also interior spiritual cacophony and restlessness. The natural world helped Thurman to listen, center down, and hear the deeper note. This listening required prayer and practice, as Thurman reflected: "Give me the listening ear. I seek this day the disciplined mind, the disciplined heart, the disciplined life that makes my ear the focus of attention."[7]

As the synodal process seeks to cultivate listening and dialogue among Catholics for the renewal of the church, we have an opportunity to learn from rich traditions of spirituality and their wisdom about listening, stillness, time, our relationship with the natural world, and

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[2] Berry, *This Day*, xxii.
[3] Lerita Coleman Brown, *What Makes You Come Alive: A Spiritual Walk with Howard Thurman* (Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf, 2023), 45.
[4] Brown, *What Makes You Come Alive*, *44*.
[5] Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 2014), 29.
[6] Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart*, 28–29.
[7] Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart*, 208.

cultivating attention. There is something about being still that opens us to the world, enables us to perceive reality—ourselves, others, even God—more fully. There are many spiritual practices that develop a capacity to be still, pay attention, listen. Here I explore Sabbath in dialogue with Jewish and Christian writings, unpacking some of the many-layered meanings of Sabbath, particularly with regard to the dignity of work, sacred time, and receptive relationship to God and all of creation. Considering Catholic teachings on Sunday and Sabbath, I develop the idea of liturgical listening, with the Eucharistic gathering a central practice of listening together.

SABBATH, CREATION, AND DIGNIFIED WORK

Sabbath keeping is an ancient practice with complex layers of meaning and debates about theology and practice in different communities. There is no single meaning of Sabbath; thus, this brief exploration picks up key themes without aiming to flatten the complexity and diversity. Two biblical motifs stand out when considering Sabbath: creation and liberation. In six days, God creates the world and then rests: "On the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it" (Gen 2:2–3). The biblical imperative to "remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy" is a call to keep alive the memory of God's creation of the world (Gen 1–2:3, Exod 20:8–11). In his 1998 apostolic letter *Dies Domini* ("The Day of the Lord"), John Paul II sought to reanimate Sunday as a sacred day of rest and worship. Key to recovering the doctrinal foundations of Sunday is, for John Paul II, the creation story in Genesis 2:3 and an understanding of the Sabbath: "In order to grasp fully the meaning of Sunday . . . we must re-read the great story of creation and deepen our understanding of the theology of the 'Sabbath.'"[8] This word "re-reading" brings to mind the ancient spiritual practice of *lectio divina*, repetitive reading or hearing the Word, meditation on it, prayer, and contemplation. One could say that Sabbath keeping is an invitation to do *lectio* with the biblical stories of creation.

So too, keeping Sabbath recalls the divine gift of freedom: "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day" (Deut 5:12–15). Sabbath observance recalls that divine act of liberation; obedience to the Sabbath command

[8] John Paul II, *Dies Domini* ("The Day of the Lord"), no. 8, www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1998/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_05071998_dies-domini.html.

is ironically a mark of freedom. This is why Walter Brueggemann argues for Sabbath as "resistance and alternative" to economism, consumerism, anxiety, and coercion—a "new social reality."[9]

The seventh day does not undermine the value and meaning of the other six but rather opens space for freedom, celebration of what has been created and given, and rest from work. Sabbath is a day set apart, a respite from toil and human manipulation of the world, from ceaseless productivity, or what Josef Pieper called "total work."[10] Work is still good—but when work dominates the human person, leaving little time for rest, recreation, stillness, and other aspects of life, humanity is depleted and the capacity for attention diminished. There must be time when, in Berry's words, we can let tasks lie, when we can come to Thurman's place of pause. "Leisure is a form of that stillness that is the necessary preparation for accepting reality," Pieper writes, for "only the person who is still can hear."[11] Sabbath is a complement to a theology of good work, where labor is part of a human calling but never the sum total. As Jewish theologian and mystic Abraham Joshua Heschel writes: "The Sabbath as a day of abstaining from work is not a depreciation but an affirmation of labor, a divine exaltation of its dignity."[12]

Here there is resonance with Catholic social teaching in its emphasis on the dignity of the worker. In his 1981 encyclical *Laborem Exercens* ("On Human Work"), John Paul II advances a high theology of work as a human calling and participation in God's creative activity. At the same time, he asserts that both work and rest are part of God's creativity and so too human life. Human beings naturally need—and have a right to—rest, time for worship, family, and recreation.[13] Jewish and Catholic teachings, then, both affirm the dignity of labor in juxtaposing work with rhythms of pause and restoration, important in their own right, not as tools to increase the efficiency of labor.

So too work must be seen in relationship to the natural world, to nonhuman creatures. As Berry laments, human work too often has destructive impact on the natural environment. Sabbath rest is needed not only to restore human beings but to give respite to the land and orient human beings again and again to the gift that is the earth and all

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[9] Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2014), xiv, 43.
[10] Josef Pieper, *Leisure, the Basis of Culture* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's, 1998), 4.
[11] Pieper, *Leisure*, 31.
[12] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1951), 28.
[13] John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens* ("On Human Work"), nos. 9, 25: www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens.html.

its creatures. As Berry's Sabbath walks cultivated his attention to the wholeness and damage of the land, so Sabbath rest deepens awareness of divine providence and the creative labors of the natural world. Berry writes: "We are to rest on the sabbath . . . in order to understand that the providence or the productivity of the living world, the most essential work, continues while we rest. This work . . . is far more complex and wonderful than any work we have done or ever will do."[14]

Sabbath theology and Catholic social teaching converge to contest systemic patterns of overwork and exploitation and environmental destruction, envisioning instead a more just, spacious, and relational way of life.[15] According to biblical texts, Sabbath rest, release, and renewal is to be extended to the poor, foreigner, animals, and the land (Exod 20:8–11, Exod 23:10–12, Lev 25:1–7). Sabbath is not seen here as a luxury but a principle of justice. In keeping Sabbath, we gain a measure of freedom from toil and recognize that need for rest and restoration in others. We learn how to pause and pay attention, listen to one another and the natural world. Jewish environmental scholar David Mevorach Seiden describes weekly Shabbat observance as a "rehearsal for living sustainably and justly in relation to the Earth and all her species."[16] In the word "rehearsal," there is the sense of practice, training, done over time to hone skills and create embodied memory. So too, Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'* notes the importance of the Sabbath—and its extension in the sabbatical year and Jubilee—as a practice of relational justice with others and the land.[17] Across Jewish and Christian traditions, the Sabbath can be seen as a liberative practice that cultivates attention, gratitude for the gifts of creation, and just relationship with other human beings and the natural world.

CONTEMPLATIVE TIME

Sabbath keeping also embodies a theology of time as sacred gift, countering the commodification and compression of time. David

[14] Berry, *This Day*, xxii.

[15] See Claire E. Wolfteich, "Sabbath Theology and Practice: Implications for Ecological Spirituality and Ethics," in *An Anthology of Contemporary Ecotheology, Philosophy, and Eco-Justice Practices*, ed. Nadja Furlan, Ecothee, vol. 7 (Ljubljana, Slovenia: Poligrafi, 2024), 75–84.

[16] David Mevorach Seidenberg, *Kabbalah and Ecology: God's Image in the More-Than-Human World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 322, footnote 1039.

[17] Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, no. 71, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

Maume describes the "overpaced American,"[18] while other scholars describe a "cult of speed,"[19] and the impact of "time poverty."[20] Our language also reflects a commodification of time, seen as capital; we "spend time," "waste time," and "save time." In this culture of speed and time scarcity, moments of nonproductive pause can seem impossible, and sitting still among trees—well, a bit sentimental. Describing Sabbath keeping as a kind of cultural and political resistance, Ana Levy-Lyons outlines the sharp counter-cultural choice before us: "As sweet and gentle as the Sabbath may be, its arrival collides violently with the secular world. It forces us to choose every week: will I surrender to a deeper principle of joy and meaning or will I embezzle time from God?"[21]

In contrast with a compressed, scarce, and anxious sense of time, writers on Sabbath describe time as sacred and spacious. For Heschel, Sabbath is a "palace in time" that brings "adjacency to eternity."[22] Sabbath keeping is an art that imbues time with holiness and vivid color, "the art of painting on the canvas of time the mysterious grandeur of the climax of creation. . . . Our keeping of the Sabbath day is a paraphrase of His sanctification of the seventh day."[23] Time is a sacred gift to be shared with mutual generosity and receptivity. Dorothy Bass describes Sabbath keeping as "receiving the gift of time."[24] John Paul II encourages Christians to "give their time to Christ."[25] Even God squanders time freely with us, lingering with the good creation on the seventh day, according to John Paul II's poetic description: "The divine rest of the seventh day . . . speaks, as it were, of God's lingering before the 'very good' work (Gen 1:31) which his hand has wrought, in order to cast upon it *a gaze full of joyous delight*. This is a 'contemplative' gaze which does not look to new accomplishments but enjoys the beauty of what has already been

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[18] David J. Maume, "The 'Over-Paced' American: Recent Trends in the Intensification of Work," in *Research in the Sociology of Work*, vol. 17: Workplace Temporalities, ed. B. Rubin (Leeds: Emerald, 2007), 251–283.

[19] Carl Honoré, *In Praise of Slowness: How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004). See also Heather Menzies, *No Time: Stress and the Crisis of Modern Life* (Madeira Park, BC: Douglas and McIntyre, 2005).

[20] On this point and its relationship to Sabbath, see Claire E. Wolfteich, "Time Poverty, Women's Labor, and Catholic Social Teaching: A Practical Theological Exploration," *Journal of Moral Theology* 2, no. 2 (June 2013): 40–59.

[21] Ana Levy-Lyons, "Sabbath Practice as Political Resistance," *Tikkun* 27 (2012): 18.

[22] Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 15, 14.

[23] Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 16.

[24] Dorothy C. Bass, *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time* (Hoboken, NJ: Jossey Bass, 2000).

[25] John Paul II, *Dies Domini*, no. 7.

achieved."[26] The practice of Sabbath keeping imitates this contemplative God who takes time to see, pay attention to, all that is. The image of a lingering God in joyful relationship with creation suggests a way of being that is relational, grateful, attentive, contemplative, spacious.

Still, inviting images of contemplative time do collide against the realities of time poverty and the fact that gender, race, and class all impact how time, work, and leisure are experienced. We should avoid an overly romanticized vision of Sabbath. Some are unable to access Sabbath time. And, while slowing can open us to listen, it is also the case that many people practice listening in choppy fragments of time, multitasking, stretching attention and energy to triage what most needs to be heard. We can embrace the contemplative invitation of Sabbath while retaining a spirit of flexibility in practice and recognition of interstitial forms of practice—the few moments of rest a parent might gain huddled in a bathroom or car, the quick prayer by an exhausted worker, the effort to pause tasks when someone unexpectedly needs a listening ear.

We need to engage holistically with these lived realities along with the beautiful theology of time that emerges in writing on Sabbath and Sunday. From a Christian perspective, writes John Paul II, Sunday is "the day which reveals the meaning of time."[27] The Lord's Day is the "eighth day"; every Sunday is a little Easter. John Paul II does not want Sabbath or Sunday to be conflated simply with leisure and its contemporary packaging in the notion of the "weekend." He critiques a cultural weakening of the meaning of Sunday, too often undermined by all-consuming work, decreasing religious affiliation, and Sunday morning youth soccer. While the concept of the "weekend" addresses our human need for rest and relaxation, "when Sunday loses its fundamental meaning and becomes merely part of a 'weekend,' it can happen that people stay locked within a horizon so limited."[28] According to John Paul II, the mystery of Christ's life, death, and resurrection fundamentally changes time. We live into this mystery particularly in setting aside Sunday as a day of worship together.

LITURGICAL LISTENING

Liturgy is by no means the only space for cultivating listening. Everyday communities of family, workplace, schools, and neighbor-

[26] John Paul II, *Dies Domini*, no. 11. I have developed the theme of contemplative lingering in Claire E. Wolfteich, "Sabbath Stillness: Thoughts of a Lingering God," *Spiritus* 24, no. 1 (2024): 146–159, doi.org/10.1353/scs.2024.a924578.
[27] John Paul II, *Dies Domini*, no. 75.
[28] John Paul II, *Dies Domini*, no. 4.

hood are training grounds for the practice of listening. And as Berry, Thurman, and many others have attested, solitude in nature can open the ear and heart in profound ways.

However, the Eucharistic liturgy is a formative practice of ecclesial listening. In dialogue with Jewish understandings of Sabbath, John Paul II seeks to reanimate Sunday as a time of contemplative rest and communal listening in the Eucharistic assembly. Together, the church listens to the Holy Spirit: "The Spirit is unfailingly present to every one of the Church's days, appearing unpredictably and lavishly with the wealth of his gifts. But it is in the Sunday gathering for the weekly celebration of Easter that the Church listens to the Spirit in a special way and reaches out with him to Christ." Listening to the Word, attentive to the Spirit, also is the foundation of the *sense of the faithful*: "Authentic participation in the *sensus fidei* relies necessarily on a profound and attentive listening to the word of God"; "What is required is an attentive and receptive listening to the Scriptures in the liturgy, and a heartfelt response."[29] John Paul II describes this contemplative listening to the Word as an imitation of Mary's "pondering": the people listen to the Word proclaimed and, like Mary the mother of Jesus, "ponder" what they hear in their hearts.[30]

As the Eucharistic liturgy is a special space for listening to the Holy Spirit and the Word, it also reflects and cultivates the community's attentiveness to the needs of others and the natural world. This listening is expressed in the prayers of the faithful, in the passing of the peace, in gratitude for the gifts of bread and wine, "fruit of the vine and work of human hands." As Pope Francis states in *Laudato Si'*: "And so the day of rest, centred on the Eucharist, sheds its light on the whole week, and motivates us to greater concern for nature and the poor."[31]

Liturgical listening has potential to form a pondering people who can hear and respond to the Holy Spirit and one another, who delight in creation and the Creator. The ability to listen to the Holy Spirit as we listen to one another is a key dimension of a synodal church, states Pope Francis in his opening address: "Without the Holy Spirit, this will be a kind of diocesan parliament, but not a Synod. We are not holding a diocesan parliament, examining this or that question, but making a journey of listening to one another and the Holy Spirit, discussing yes, but discussing with the Holy Spirit, which is a way of

[29] International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, nos. 92, 93, 99, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html.
[30] John Paul II, *Dies Domini*, nos. 85, 86.
[31] Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, no. 237.

praying."[32] Liturgical listening cultivates habits of prayerful discernment and attention essential for the synodal church. For this reason, it is not surprising that the synthesis report on the synod described the Eucharist as "the source and summit of synodality."[33]

LISTENING WITH THE EAR OF THE HEART

Summer mist settles in around the mountains surrounding Weston Priory, a Benedictine monastery in southern Vermont. Mass was being held in the converted barn, walls open to the wet green grass outside. Brother Michael, guitar still slung around his shoulders, shares his homily with the circle of his fellow monks and the rows of folks gathered on this Sunday morning. In the early morning quiet set aside for *lectio divina*, he said, the song of the small brown hermit thrush deepens the silence and sustains him. Noting that the Green Mountains form the monastery's back yard, and the Okemo Mountains its front yard, Brother Michael paints a picture of a community deeply attentive to the beauty of creation, the monks' silence and song blending with the sounds of creatures all around. From my seat at Mass, I look out at the trees and the edges of the labyrinth, paths curving in between tall grasses that host darting butterflies and a dragonfly or two.

The opening line of the prologue of the *Rule of Saint Benedict* counsels: "Listen with the ear of your heart." Listening is a central practice for Benedictine spirituality, a form of obedience, presence, and attentiveness. That listening is embodied in the personal and communal practices of *lectio divina*: "Let us hear with attentive ears what the divine voice cries out to us daily."[34] Listening to the Word, listening for the Spirit, are essential daily practices; so too is listening for God's voice in one another and all of creation. Known for its liturgical music, the Weston Priory monks produced an original song entitled "Listen," drawing from the importance of the practice in Benedictine spirituality: "Listen and gentle be present to all you've ever close kept in your loving heart! . . . Often look up and see the splendor of life suspended in your heart and mind so longing to be forever alive in this moment's stillness: the thrush echoes your delight."[35]

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[32] Francis, "Address to the Faithful of the Diocese of Rome," September 28, 2021, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/september/documents/20210918-fedeli-diocesiroma.html.

[33] XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, "A Synodal Church in Mission: Synthesis Report," October 28, 2023, 5.

[34] Judith Sutera, *St. Benedict's Rule: An Inclusive Translation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2021).

[35] The Benedictine Foundation of the State of Vermont, "Listen," (1973, 1994): www.westonpriory.org/esales/lyrics/Listen.pdf.

Most Sunday liturgies take place in churches and chapels with solid walls, without the open view to the Green Mountains and the porous openness to the song of the thrush mingling with prayer. More likely there are children being hustled to crying rooms, people half-listening as they mull to-do lists, and cell phones buzzing at uncomfortable points in the Eucharistic prayer. Still, we can draw much from this image of a liturgical, listening community. Liturgy perhaps can train the ear to hear, re-read the stories of creation and liberation, ponder the Word, listen for the Spirit, listen to the needs and hearts of a community and the world around us. Liturgy perhaps can reflect "the reality of time" as divine gift, confounding productive and consumerist frameworks of time, patterning us to the mystery of sacred time.

LISTENING AND SABBATH

In reflecting on Sabbath, we are led to ask: What do our patterns of work and time use occlude from our hearing? What "deeper note" might we hear if we could "center down"? Are we locked in limited horizons, missing a more fundamental mystery that has reshaped the meaning of time? And, especially in light of the call to be a synodal church, how do we as a faith community learn to listen better together?

Sabbath is a powerful theology and practice—a "resistance and alternative" to oppressive systems of work that deny human beings space for rest and relationship. Sabbath invites a regular rhythm of renewal. It affirms time not as productive capital to be spent and saved but rather as a lavish divine gift, made holy. Sabbath turns us towards the whole of the created world—the trees, storms, and tall sea grass—to notice and care for all creatures and the land. This is a posture of attention, receptivity, and relationship, all qualities essential to the practice of listening. And in the Sunday Eucharistic gathering, the church has a foundational practice of communal, contemplative listening.

From Wendell Berry's Kentucky trees to Howard Thurman's deeper note, from Benedict's ear of the heart to John Paul II's liturgical pondering: listening is a spiritual practice. It is a contemplative and relational practice of attention and receptivity. Traditions of spirituality bring wisdom about how we learn this practice. Sabbath theology and practice opens an alternative vision of work and time and a dialogical space for listening together with all of creation to God's own creative and liberative spirit. M

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