



“Without Sunday, we cannot live”

In the year 304... the Emperor Diocletian forbade Christians, on pain of death, from possessing the Scriptures, from gathering on Sundays to celebrate the Eucharist and from building places in which to hold their assemblies.

In Abitene, a small village in present-day Tunisia, 49 Christians were taken by surprise one Sunday while they were celebrating the Eucharist, gathered in the house of Octavius Felix, thereby defying the imperial prohibitions. They were arrested and taken to Carthage to be interrogated by the Proconsul Anulinus.

Significant among other things is the answer a certain Emeritus gave to the Proconsul who asked him why on earth they had disobeyed the Emperor's severe orders. He replied: '*Sine dominico non possumus*' [Without Sunday, we cannot live]: that is, we cannot live without joining together on Sunday to celebrate the Eucharist. We would lack the strength to face our daily problems and not to succumb.

After atrocious tortures, these 49 martyrs of Abitene were killed. Thus, they confirmed their faith with bloodshed. They died, but they were victorious: today we remember them in the glory of the Risen Christ.

The experience of the martyrs of Abitene is also one on which we 21st-century Christians should reflect. It is not easy for us either to live as Christians, even if we are spared such prohibitions from the emperor. From a spiritual point of view, the world in which we find ourselves, often marked by unbridled consumerism, religious indifference and a secularism closed to transcendence, can appear a desert...

The Sunday precept is not, therefore, an externally imposed duty, a burden on our shoulders. On the contrary, taking part in the Celebration, being nourished by the Eucharistic Bread and experiencing the communion of their brothers and sisters in Christ is a need for Christians, it is a joy; Christians can thus replenish the energy they need to continue on the journey we must make every week...

Christ's Resurrection happened on the first day of the week, which in the Scriptures is the day of the world's creation. For this very reason Sunday was considered by the early Christian community as the day on which the new world began, the one on which, with Christ's victory over death, the new creation began.

As they gathered round the Eucharistic table, the community was taking shape as a new people of God. St. Ignatius of Antioch described Christians as “having attained new hope” and presented them as people “who lived in accordance with Sunday” (“*iuxta dominicam viventes*”). In this perspective, the Bishop of Antioch wondered: “How will we be able to live without him, the One whom the prophets so long awaited?” (Ep. ad Magnesios, 9, 1-2).

“How will we be able to live without him?” In these words of St. Ignatius we hear echoing the affirmation of the martyrs of Abitene: “*Sine dominico non possumus*”.

Pope Benedict XVI, Homily at Italian National Eucharistic Congress, Bari, 29 May 2005