

August 10, 2008  
The Sunday After Transfiguration

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Christians over the centuries have reflected deeply on the meaning of the Lord's Sabbath rest after the six days of Creation.

Since no serious person imagines the Lord needed to alleviate the fatigue of His labor, the true meaning of the Lord's rest must reside in its symbolic character. Both Isaiah (40:28) and the Psalmist (121 [120]:3-4) insisted that God does not grow weary. Nor did the Creator simply abandon Creation to its own natural forces. Against this thesis of Deism, we have the testimony of Jesus, "My Father has been working until now" (John 5:17).

That is to say, the true meaning of the Lord's rest must be something beyond its literal sense. From earliest times, therefore, Christians have considered the Sabbath with respect to its symbolic value. Seeing it as prophetic, for example, St. Paul included the Sabbath within the "shadow of things to come" (Colossians 2:16), and in the Epistle to the Hebrews the Lord's day of rest became a type of the eternal rest of His people (4:1-11). Other Christian writers developed this apocalyptic symbolism (e.g., Origen, *On Numbers* 22.4).

In the Book of Exodus, the Lord's seventh day rest bears chiefly a social and moral sense, serving as an example to man, a model for his imitation: God rested in order to affirm something important about man's moral and social life. It served as a symbol of human freedom and dignity (20:10-11).

This much is clear enough in the Torah's large provision for human rest--an entire day each week. First of all, adherence to this commandment placed a guaranteed limit on the exploitation of human labor. This guarantee is considered so important to human existence the Lord Himself provided the model for it.

I believe there is further sense, moreover, in which the Lord's original day of rest is a symbol of human freedom and dignity: In His Sabbath rest God "backs off" from Creation, so to speak, as though to let the creatures themselves have a hand at it. Having established their varying natures--"each according to its kind"--the Lord gives creatures room to "be and do" according to their innate dispositions. This is only symbolically suggested, of course, because in fact God continually preserves His creatures in existence.

Nonetheless, the Lord's "taking a day off" indicates an important aspect of this preservation, as though Creation can get along without training wheels. That is to say, God gives creatures room to be themselves and to act according to their varying natures.

The assertion that God respects the differing dispositions of created things applies to human nature in a unique way, inasmuch as freedom of thought and volition is an essential and defining quality of man's being. God's day of rest is a symbolic assertion of that freedom. He steps back, as it were, to affirm human freedom.

I am not the first to suggest that the Christian religion is radically different from Islam in this respect, because Christians have long recognized that the biblical doctrine of Creation differs rather radically from that of Islam: According to Muslim theology God's omnipotent will, which continually brings forth all things from nothingness, is sovereignly imposed on Creation. There is no level of separation between God's creating act and the natural being of things. The distinguishing properties of creatures are not determined by their created natures, but by God's continued disposition of them according to His sovereign will. That will is immediately imposed on all created things, thus causing them to exist. The sole responsibility of man's will is to submit to the divine sovereignty.

In Christian theology, on the contrary, the creating will of God is mediated through the Logos that causes created things to be what they are. Thus, within God's creating activity, the Logos provides "room" for creatures to act according to their nature. This is the "space" within which human beings, by reason of their nature, are free.

Although Islam--like all the major religions--proclaims a "natural law" in the structure of the world, that law is rooted immediately in the will of the Lawgiver, not in the world's natural structure. It is no accident, then, that the Qu'ran says nothing about God resting on the seventh day. Consistent with this silence, it does not prescribe a weekly day of rest.

©2008 Patrick Henry Reardon

**All Saints Orthodox Church  
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America**

4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641

Church Office: (773) 777-0749

<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

**Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor**

[phrii@touchstonemag.com](mailto:phrii@touchstonemag.com)

**Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:**

[www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html](http://www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html)

**Pastoral Ponderings:**

[http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral\\_ponderings.php](http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php)