

# Sabbath and Sunday: The meaning of the day of rest in the ancient church – A hope for the future?

**Author:**Cristian Vaida<sup>1</sup> **Affiliation:**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Systematic and Historical Theology, Faculty of Orthodox Theology Andrei Saguna Sibiu, University Lucian Blaga Sibiu, Sibiu, Romania

**Corresponding author:**

Cristian Vaida,  
cvaida2003@yahoo.com

**Dates:**

Received: 31 Oct. 2022

Accepted: 23 Jan. 2023

Published: 28 Feb. 2023

**How to cite this article:**

Vaida, C., 2023, 'Sabbath and Sunday: Understanding the meaning of the day of rest in the ancient church: A hope for the future?', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 79(1), a8263. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i1.8263>

**Copyright:**

© 2023. The Authors.  
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

The Sabbath is part of Jewish tradition. In Christianity it has taken on a new meaning. Both faiths saw it as a gift from God, a tool to affirm one's spiritual creed and identity, and a way to maintain a distinct faith identity. The secularism of contemporary society has resulted in a misinterpretation of the purpose of Sunday rest and a disregard for the spiritual aspects that the Sunday celebration involves. A false perception of Sunday rest has emerged in modern times: It is not perceived as a divine gift that enables a spiritual ministry, which leads to resistance and opposition to the restless anxiety of the consumerist world and serves as an alternative to advertising's demanding presence in this world. This rest, as a gift from God, has been one of the most fundamental defining features of man's connection with God throughout history. Since Christian antiquity, there has been substantial debate over how to observe this tremendous gift of rest. Rest was valued as a gift in the Jewish culture in a specific way that included defining the identity of the chosen people. Later, in the Christian tradition, it was connected to the celebration of Christ's Resurrection and the spiritual healing He provided to the world. There has been much debate on the continuity and discontinuity between the Jewish Sabbath and the Christian Sunday, as well as on how the transition from the Sabbath to the Sunday celebration came about. The two qualities of the Jewish Sabbath – a day of rest and a day of religious celebration – have been transferred to the Christian Sunday but in a radically different context.

**Contribution:** By analysing early Christian literature, this study aims to investigate how the concept of Sabbath rest was taken up and reconstructed in Christianity in the celebration of Sunday, and how spiritual work was a constant in the life of Christian communities up until the 4th century, when Sunday rest was established by law. Contrary to Rordorf's opinions, this article aims to show that Christians, despite being physically obligated to work on Sundays, tacitly observed this day as a day of resurrection, emphasising the spiritual work of the virtues as their vehicle towards their entrance into the rest in God, even before Sunday became socially established as a day of rest (Heb 4:1–11). This study intends to show that this unique vision of the Sunday rest of the early church can be an element of resistance and an alternative to the demanding stress and restless anxiety of modern society.

**Keywords:** Sunday; Sabbath; day of rest; day of worship; spiritual rest; secularisation.

## Introduction

The Sabbath played a fundamental role in the Jewish cultural, spiritual and social universe. Its importance is because of its biblical, cosmic and eschatological foundation (Jenni 1956:20). Being linked to the creation of heaven and earth and all the living creatures (Gn 1–2), marking the order of the entire cosmos, it also becomes a sign of the covenant of the chosen people with Yahweh. God has chosen His people for a special mission in the history of world salvation, giving them the Sabbath and the 7-day week, because they had a remarkable significance as a principle underlying the order of the cosmos and salvation history (Rordorf 1962:52). Therefore, Israel understood the Sabbath as a precious gift of God, a sign of God's faithfulness to His covenant with His people.

The Jewish Sabbath was at first closely linked to the changes and celebrations related to the moon, but later became identified with the 7th day and became one of the most important Jewish cultic institutions, focusing on the concept of rest. If the Sabbath in pre-exilic times should have been a full moon day (Köckert 2004:117–120), so based on Isaiah 1:13 and Hosea 2:13 for instance, the weekly Sabbath of the Decalogue had to be explained from a fusion of full moon day and weekly day of rest in the time of the exile (Grund 2011; Hartenstein 2004:83–102). The prohibition

**Read online:**

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

of all work on the 7th day of the week, which was justified by privilege in Exodus 34:21 and ethically in Exodus 23:12, but did not yet bear the name Sabbath, was given in pre-exilic times. In the Decalogue it becomes a cultic holiday, as it had developed in the exile as a confessional sign of the Israelites. In the foreign land, where the traditional sacrificial service could not be practiced, the celebration of the Sabbath had obviously become unifying cultic signs of identification for the exiles. Because the Sabbath had now become a 'Sabbath for Yahweh your God', it had to be 'sanctified' and thus snatched from the profanity of everyday life and because Israel was tempted to be too busy with the cares of everyday life and might resign itself to the difficulties of keeping the Sabbath, especially it had to be urgently inculcated to remember (Ex 20:8), or, in a more domineering tone, to observe the 'sanctification' of the Sabbath (Dt 5:12). In the post-exilic period, this ritual character of the Sabbath was emphasized, and there was a tendency to make the Sabbath a central and salvific institution of Israel, which the Mishnah indicates, giving it first place among the feasts and including the spiritual rest as the main 'sanctifying' activity (Jeremias 2015:380–381).

The institutionalisation of the Sabbath and its formal practice in the New Testament era inevitably led to some conflicts that Jesus had on the subject with the leaders of the chosen people (Mk 2:23–3:6; Mt 12:1–14; Lk 6:1–11; Jn 7:22–23). He was the Lord of the Sabbath (Mk 2:28par), the One who came into the world to establish a new Sabbath, His unique Sabbath, characterized not by outward perceptions and rules, but by rest in God, by loving communion with Him and with neighbour.

The early church understood and lived from her earliest days this new reality of rest in God expressed in Hebrews 3:7–4:11: entry into the new promised land is still possible today on the new Sabbath, on the one, eschatological day, the day of Christ's presence. Through the Saviour, all the prescriptions of the Old Law have found their actual fulfillment. The church saw the Sabbath and the other Jewish feasts as foreshadowing of the Truth, which became irrelevant when it came into the world. This is the reason for the gradual separation of the church from the synagogue and the shift from Sabbath observance to Sunday celebration, which became the main feast day for celebrating the Resurrection.

This process has been very difficult. In the 1st century Judaizing tendencies still persisted in the church. Many Christian communities in Asia Minor continued to observe the Sabbath in parallel with the observance of the late Sunday until around the 4th century (Kraft 1965:31–33). The continuity and discontinuity at the same time between the Jewish Sabbath and the Christian Sunday was the characteristic note of the early Christian cultic tradition (Frankenmölle 2006:59–69). Even though formally, the two specific elements of the Sabbath: rest and cultic celebration were taken over into Christian practice, they acquired a new meaning and content. The eternal rest promised in the Old

Covenant was brought into the world by Christ and was lived in the church as a herald of eternal happiness in the kingdom of heaven (Lukács 2020).

## Sunday: Day of rest

Analysing the ancient texts of the early church, Rordorf (1962) has concluded that Sunday, as a new feast with Christian specificity, was primarily a day of worship, with the Eucharist at its centre, and in time only became a day of rest:

In the early days of the Church, Sunday was just a day of worship and nothing more; Christians knew no requirement of rest on Sundays. If today, as Christians, we demand and respect Sunday rest as a matter of course, we need to know whether and how we can justify it ... A Christian Sunday rest, as a principle of abstention from all work, would not have been possible in the early days of the Church until the Emperor Constantine. Simply because no one in the entire Roman Empire stopped work on Sundays, neither Jews, Greeks, nor Christians ... (p. 152)

The given statement refers only to the concept of the Sunday as a day of rest as it is known in its institutionalized form since the time of Constantine the Great. Rordorf does not seem to see that the patristic literature of the early ages, however, also speaks of another rest, a spiritual rest, applied in particular to the concept of the Sabbath, which springs from communion with the Risen Christ, a rest which has been associated with the Sunday Eucharist.

The following will describe the two different concepts of rest. Firstly, the way in which Sunday rest was institutionalized from the time of Constantine the Great onwards will be analysed. Secondly, in another chapter the reality of the existence in early times of a spiritual rest perceived as a spiritual work specific to Sunday will be discussed. Finally, it will be shown that the spiritual rest is a gift that modern man must again take into account because it is a form of resistance to all the assault and stress imposed by consumer society.

In the pre-Constantinian period when Christianity was a forbidden religion, Christians belonged overwhelmingly to the lower classes of the population, especially the slave class, and could not afford to give up work on Sundays. However, historical documents show that Eucharistic gatherings took place on Sundays, either early in the morning, when it was still dark or late in the evening (Peichl 1958:44–45).

Until the 2nd century, there is not the slightest hint in the sources that Sunday was in any way socially marked by Christians with rest from work. *The Epistle of Barnabas* (15:9) states, 'Therefore we also spend the 8th day (Sunday) in joy' [Διὸ καὶ ἀγομεν τὴν ἡμέραν τὴν ὀγδόην εἰς εὐφοροσύνην] (eds. Kraft & Prigent 1971:188–189), a statement that cannot be taken as a testimony to Sunday rest from work; the Sunday joy mentioned here is that of the resurrection that was celebrated every Sunday (Rordorf 1962:156).

In Tertullian's work *De oratione*, we find a passage that is often cited as evidence of Christian Sunday rest in the pre-Constantinian period:

But we must guard ourselves ... on the day of the Lord's resurrection not only from this exercise (i.e. kneeling in prayer), but from every attitude and exercise of fear, and also defer business [*differeiltes etiam negotia*], so as not to give the devil any place [*ne quem diabolo locum demus*]. (eds. Reifferscheid & Wissowa 1890:196)

The rest mentioned here by Tertullian had a cultic orientation (Huber 1958:91). The words 'to give the devil no place' are also a testimony to a spiritual work specific to this day, the lack of which the evil one could take advantage of. Sunday was the day of spiritual rest and recollection on which people 'put off business'. Slaves were also exempt from work on Saturdays and Sundays as mentioned in *the Apostolic Constitutions* VIII, 33,1–2 (Funk 1905:538), and *Testamentum Domini* II, 12 (Rahmani 1899:135) states that those burdened with work should enjoy rest on Easter and every Lord's Day.

Socially, Sunday became an official day of rest through the legislation of Emperor Constantine the Great who promulgated the first state laws on Sunday rest. The first law (Codex Justin. XII de feriis, 3) dates from 03 March 321 and provides for a total interruption of public work on Sundays, from which only peasants are exempted so as not to cause delays in agricultural work (Krüger 1959:127). As Eusebius of Caesarea remarks, Constantine wanted by this decree to favour the religious and cultic life of the Christian minority to whom he had just given religious freedom, in order to 'gradually make all men worshippers of God' (ed. Heikel 1902:124). By introducing Sunday as a legal day of rest the great emperor wanted to bring into his empire a counterpoint to the cult of the sun by unifying the empire under a monotheistic solar religion (Böhmer 1931:16).

The institutionalisation of the day of rest was an important moment in the life of the church, and the fact that no church synod of this period alludes to the imperial Sunday law may be an indication that the church received this imperial act as a natural one, Sunday having always been in the consciousness of the early Christians as the day of rest in God, the day dedicated to spiritual ministry (Brattston 2017).

With the secularisation of Christian life, the Sunday rest departed from its original meaning, and the Lord's Day came to be celebrated in a very un-Christian way (Huber 1958:94). A rediscovery of the spiritual meaning of rest, of the spiritual reality that Christians have experienced since the early ages, was needed. In what follows the main patristic texts will be mentioned, which express this unique vision of the church on Sunday rest and how Sunday became the new Christian Sabbath.

## Sunday: The new Christian Sabbath? A questioning of the sources

The early Christian communities took up the concept of Sabbath rest and gave it a whole new meaning through faith

in Jesus Christ (Danielou 1957:262–279). God's rest described in the Book of Genesis as the crowning achievement of creation was understood as the Creator's undivided communion with his creatures. The rest prepared by Yahweh for his people was to be perfected in the age to come. A new day of rest is brought into the world by Christians and is given to those who open themselves to him by faith and spiritual work. The new rest is defined as spiritual work, as rest in the love of God through Jesus Christ, a rest that will be thoroughly enjoyed in the age to come. In this sense, the exegesis of the early church almost always understood eschatological rest as 'Sabbath' and, conversely, the true Sabbath as eschatological rest.

*The Epistle of Barnabas*, written around 130–140, A.D. presents the concept of God's rest as a gift that also implies a response from believers:

'And the Lord rested on the seventh day', These words mean: When his Son shall come, he will put an end to the time of transgression ... then he will rest with glory on the seventh day. 6. He saith again, 'Thou shalt sanctify it, with clean hands and with a pure heart'. 7. See, that then o we shall sanctify and o we shall be able to do it ourselves, when we shall have full rest ... 8. He also says to them, 'Your new moons and Saturdays I do not suffer after'. This is what he means: 'I do not like Saturdays now, but that Saturday which I have made, on which, after I have rested from all, I will make the beginning of the eighth day, which is the beginning of another world'. 9. Therefore, we joyfully celebrate the eighth day after Saturday, on which Christ also rose and, having appeared, ascended into heaven. (eds. Kraft & Prigent 1971:188–189)

Justin Martyr and Philosopher, in his *Dialogue with the Jew Trypho* 12, 3 defines the concept of rest in God specific to Sunday as the Sabbath that is pleasing to God in terms of the spiritual work of acquiring virtues and turning from sin:

The new law wants you to celebrate the Sabbath all the time, and you think you are godly when you work nothing for a day ... Our God is not pleased with this ... if a perjurer or a thief is found among you, let him cease; if an adulterer is found, let him repent; then celebrate God's blessed Sabbath ... (ed. Goodspeed 1915:135)

Also, in the 3rd century, Origen succeeds in defining in his work *In Numeros Homiliae* 23, 4 how pre-Constantinian Christianity took up, reformulated and filled with new meaning the concept of sabbatical rest by associating it with the spiritual work of acquiring the virtues:

Let's leave the Jewish Sabbath customs and see what Sabbath-keeping should be like for the Christian. On the Sabbath you are not to do any worldly work ... Thus, there will be a true Sabbath when God will rest from all his works: the Eon that will come, when sorrow, grief and sighing will disappear, and God will be all in all. On that Sabbath, God will also allow us to keep the feast day with Him and to celebrate with His holy angels ... (ed. Doutreleau 2001:124)

From these few pre-Constantinian sources, we understand that even though Sunday was not yet established as an

official day of rest in the empire, Christians perceived the new sabbatical rest as the day of spiritual ministry. In this regard, Eusebius of Caesarea in his commentary on Psalm 91/92 states that the true Sabbath is that of turning away from sins and devoting oneself entirely to God. Those who use the Sabbath day as an occasion for idleness or for any other purpose than rest in the work of drawing near to God are, in his opinion, those who celebrate:

[T]he lying Sabbaths which the Logos by the new covenant has forsaken has moved the feast of the Sabbath to the dawn of light and given us the icon of true rest [ἀληθινῆς ἀναπαύσεως εἰκόνα], the saving, reigning and first day of light [τὴν σωτηρίαν καὶ Κυριακὴν καὶ πρώτην τοῦ φωτὸς ἡμέραν] in which the Savior of the world, after all his deeds (performed) among men, obtained victory over death, passed through the gates of heaven, exceeded (the domain) of the six-day creation, and received the Sabbath according to God and the thrice-blessed rest [τό τε θεοπρεπέδες Σάββατον καὶ τὴν τρισμακαρίαν ἀνάπαυσιν ὑπολαμβάνων] ... On this day, which is the day of light, we gather at six-day intervals and celebrate the holy and spiritual sabbaths [ἁγία τε Σάββατα καὶ πνευματικὰ] and fulfill, according to the spiritual law, what the priests were commanded to do on the sabbath. For we bring spiritual sacrifices and offerings [θυσίας τε γὰρ καὶ ἀναφοράς], those called offerings of praise and offerings of joy ... and all the rest (doing), indeed, all that ought to have been done on the Sabbath, we have transferred to the Lord's Day, because it is more important and has precedence, because it is the first and more precious than the Jewish Sabbath. (PG 23, 1169–1172)

This passage is essential for understanding how in the 4th century the Lord's Day was perceived and experienced as a spiritual ministry defined as rest in God and as a Eucharistic celebration.

Also, in the 4th century Athanasius the Great in his writing *De sabbatis et circumcisione* wants to specify the deep spiritual meaning of the transition from Sabbath to Sunday by showing that:

When God made the first creation, he ceased to work; therefore, that generation also kept the Sabbath on the seventh day. But the second creation has no end; therefore, God has not ceased to work, but continues to work until now. Therefore, neither do we keep the Sabbath on one day [οὐδὲ σαββατιζομεν ἡμέραν], as during the first (creation), but we look forward to the future Sabbath of the Sabbaths [τὰ μέλλοντα ἐλπίζομεν Σάββατα σαββάτων]; whereby the new creation will not end. For circumcision this purpose the Sabbath was given to the people of old, that they might know both the end of the old creation and the beginning (of the new) creation. (PG 28, 133)

Other pre-Constantinian patristic testimonies are also relevant. For Epiphanius of Salamis, Christ is the true Sabbath who brought spiritual rest by stopping sin (ed. Holl 1915:127), for Ambrose of Milan, rest from evil is the new Sabbath (Adriaen & Ballerini 1957:31–33) and for Augustine (*Enarrationes in Psalmos* 91, 22) Sabbath rest is the peace of mind that comes from communion with God (eds. Dekkers & Fraipont 1956:123).

All these patristic testimonies speak unanimously of the same spiritual reality of the 1st centuries. The sabbatical

rest was perceived and lived from the beginning in a Christological and spiritual note. True rest was not the absence of work, but the work of the virtues, communion with God. Even though in the 4th century the Jewish Sabbath and the Christian Sunday overlapped with corresponding social consequences (Rordorf 1972:XIV–XXI), yet in the Christian consciousness Sunday rest was from the beginning a new and unique reality linked to communion with Christ through the spiritual life and Eucharistic communion. How Sunday was perceived in these two fundamental components is also reflected in the patristic sources of the 1st centuries, which will be presented.

## Sunday: The new creation of Christianity

Sunday was from the beginning celebrated as the day of the Resurrection. Its importance in the life of the early church is also shown in the multitude of names this day has received (Rordorf 1962:269–289). According to the Jewish numbering system of the days of the week Sunday was called the first of the week or weeks [μῦτῶν σαββάτων] (Mc 16:2; Lk 24:1; Jn 20:1; Ac 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2). Following the Sabbath, it has also been called the 8th day, as a foretaste yet from this world of the happiness of the life to come. Christians also called it the Lord's Day [κυριακὴ ἡμέρα], (Ac 1:10 and in Dd 14:1), for this day had at its centre the celebration of the 'breaking of bread' (1 Cor 11:20), which actualized in the bosom of the community the unique event of the Lord's Resurrection.

These names indicate how Sunday was lived in the early Christian communities. Even though it was initially celebrated in some Judeo-Christian environments together with the Sabbath, Sunday was perceived as a new creation of Christianity (Wijngaarde 2015), which had at its core a unique and spiritual concept of Sunday rest as a loving response to the gift of God's rest present in the world in cultic celebration.

The liturgical and patristic sources are a living testimony to this. They indicate how Sunday has been perceived over time and in particular, how rest has been defined on this feast day.

Ignatius of Antioch in the 2nd century clearly shows the transition from letter to spirit, from the shadow of the Jewish law to the truth of the Christian faith centred on the new life that Christ gives in the church ([*Epistula ad Magnesios*] 9, 1–2):

Therefore, those who lived in the old ordinances have come to the new hope, no longer observing the Sabbath [μηκέτι σαββατιζοντες], but living according to the Lord's Day [κατὰ κυριακὴν ζῶντες], in which also our life has dawned, through Him and through His death. (ed. Camelot 1951:102)

The importance of Sunday as the 8th day and also as the first day that opens a new age is shown by Justin Martyr in his Dialogue with the Jew Trypho 41,4 when he states:

The commandment of circumcision, which commanded the new-born to be circumcised on the eighth day, was a reference to the true circumcision by which we were circumcised from wickedness through Jesus Christ our Lord, who rose from the dead on the first day of the week. The first day of the week, though it is the first of all the days of the week, is called the eighth, in which it is counted again by the number of all the days of the cycle, but does not cease to be the first. (ed. Goodspeed 1915:189)

For Clement the Alexandrian, the true rest of Christians is the day of the Lord, the 8th day [ἐν Ὁγδοῦδι] also called Sunday (ed. Sagnard 1948:185–186), which prepares, by spiritual work:

[B]y abstaining from all evil, the primordial day of our true rest, which is also the day of the creation of true light, in which all things are seen and all things are inherited. (Stromata VI, 16, 138, 1–2; ed. Stählin 1906:52)

It is evident that for the Christians of the 3rd century, the reality of spiritual rest as the work of the virtues was the essential aspect of the Lord's Day and not the social rest later decreed by the imperial authority.

Also, from the pre-Constantinian period and in the same note comes the testimony of Cyprian of Carthage who, using as a symbolic pretext the Jewish custom of circumcising the 8th day sees Sunday, as:

The eighth day, that is, the first day after the Sabbath, on which the Lord was to arise and raise us up and give us spiritual circumcision ... But this image (prefiguration) lost its significance when, later, the reality (of it) appeared and we received the spiritual circumcision. (Cyprianus, Epistula 64, 4; ed. Hartel 1871:89)

Athanasius the Great in his 4th century work *De sabbatis et circumcissione* sees Sunday as a new circumcision, as the day of spiritual renewal not only through spiritual ministry but especially through the Sacrament of Baptism:

Because God wanted to renew the six-day creation, he appointed a day for renewal, which the Holy Spirit proclaims by saying in the Psalm, 'This is the day the Lord has made' ... For this day is not for all, but for those who die to sin and live for the Lord ... The Lord's Day is the beginning of creation and brings the Sabbath to an end, so the same Lord's Day brought circumcision to an end, giving birth again to man. For both were fulfilled on the eighth day: both the beginning of creation and the rebirth of man. Therefore, the eighth day abolished the Sabbath, and not the Sabbath abolished the eighth day ... and circumcision was the foreshadowing, the typos of the stripping by Baptism [Τῆς γὰρ διὰ τοῦ βαπτίσματος ἀπεκδόσεως τύπος ἦν ἡ περιτομή]. (PG 28, 140)

For Basil the Great, Sunday is the day of Resurrection on which one does not kneel because it is the foretaste of the rest of the future life, even in this world:

We make prayers standing on Sundays in one of the Sabbaths [ἐν τῇ μιᾷ τοῦ σαββάτου], but we do not all know the reason. [We do this] because [this day] seems to be the image of the future age

[τοῦ προσδοκωμένου αἰῶνος εἶναι εἰκόνη]. Therefore, although it is the beginning of days, it was not called by Moses the first, but one [μία]. 'For', says (Scripture), 'evening was made, and morning was made, one day', as if the same day were to be repeated many times. This day is one and at the same time the eighth, and (symbolizes) that truly one and eighth day; it is the state which will be revealed after this time, the endless, unending, ultimate day, that endless and eternal age. [τὴν ἄπαστον ἡμέραν, τὴν ἀνέσπερον, τὴν ἀδιάδοχον, τὸν ἀληκτον ἐκείνον καὶ ἀγήρω αἰῶνα]. (De Spiritu Sancto 27, 66; ed. Pruche 1968:485)

Basil knows an essential aspect of Sunday, namely its connection with the Resurrection of Christ and Christian baptism. In this sense, it is called ἀναστάσιμος ἡμέρα. But Basil stops at another sense. Sunday is the image of eternal life. In this sense, he admits that: 'Moses calls it "one" when he refers to the first day'. Indeed, the fact that unity is the principle of time makes it an image of eternity, which is one; it is not only a philosophical speculation, introduced by Basil but also a criticism of the expression "first day" applied to Sunday, which is remarkable. It is also called the eighth, meaning the state that follows time and knows no sequence, unlike the 7 days, which designates time. Therefore, according to Basil the Great the purpose of Sunday is to direct hearts to eternal life and to prepare for it (Danielou 1965:77–78).

This complex and deeply theological vision of Sunday rest is also found in Gregory the Theologian. In Oratio, 41 he describes their Pentecost as being composed of a series of 7 weeks, which lacks 1 day, for 'the number seven, by itself or by composing itself [ἐπὶ ἑαυτὸν συντιθέμενος], gives birth to Pentecost, 1 day missing [μιάς δεούσης ἡμέρας], which from the age to come we have taken, and the eighth [ὀγδόην] being it and, also, the first [πρώτην], or – rather – one [single] and undivided [μίαν καὶ ἀκατάλυτον]; that there was to end the [7th-day] rest or 'sabbatism' here [τὸν ἐνταῦθα Σαββατισμὸν] of souls, that it might be given to the seven, and to the eight, as the text of Solomon' (Ec 11:2) had before us (PG 36, 432).

The one who will summarize this impressive patristic vision of the new meaning of Sunday rest is Nicodemus Aghiorite who in his *Confesio fidei* devotes an entire chapter to Sunday and its specificity in Christianity. The Lord's Day is in his vision the day of the most important events in the economy of salvation: creation, residence in Christ through the Resurrection, Pentecost and the Parousia. Taking up the affirmations of Gregory Palamas, Maxim the Confessor, Nicodemus shows that Sunday is now the icon of the age to come, being the foretaste of that eternal, uncreated, unique and eschatological day (Paschos 1996:132).

## Spiritual rest: The solution to the crisis of the modern world?

The analysis of the patristic texts presented above indicates that Rordorf did not grasp, namely that from the very early days of the church, Christians were aware of the importance of the day of rest as God's gift and the perpetual invitation to

enter into this rest through the spiritual work of the virtues and by dedicating 1 day of the week to this unique communion with the Creator. Spiritual rest is a gift that modern man must once again consider because it is a form of resistance to all the assault and stress imposed by consumer society (Brueggemann 2017) but above all it is also a way of resolving the profound ecological crisis of the contemporary world (Gillmor 1996:261–270). All human interventions that have not known communion with God as the gift of spiritual rest on the surrounding nature have led to serious ecological problems such as ozone depletion, global warming, acid rain, deforestation, desertification, famine, land degradation, habitat loss, species extinction, nuclear accidents and pollution in all its forms (Bauckham 2011; Deane-Drummond 2011).

The biblical and patristic perspective referred to here indicates that Sunday rest has never been understood simplistically, as rest and the absence of any activity, but as a gift of God which man should cultivate for the whole of creation, which was from the beginning called to enter through man into this rest of God (Johnson Leese 2018).

The biblical account of creation indicates that the integrity of the created universe was God's will, for there was order and peace when harmony prevailed among God, humanity, and nature. Every element in the whole created order was important to God, who 'saw that all was very good'. All creation lived together harmoniously on the 7th day as it tasted and shared in God's rest. Adam's subsequent fall affected not only humanity but also the natural world; human sin and the departure from the rest of spiritual ministry and engagement in purely material work often destructive to the environment are the consequences of sin.

Modern man must understand that the Sabbath rest of the Bible includes within itself respect for the whole creation, the wise working of the earth, care for animals and for the whole ecosystem of the planet, all of which await deliverance from spoilage and sharing in the joy of the freedom of the greatness of the sons of God (Rm 8:21). Sabbath rest can bring this joy to the contemporary world (Gillmor 1996:264). The Pauline's concept of the rest of creation in and through man's communion with God points to the holistic vision of early Christianity that needs to be rediscovered today in the lives of 21st-century Christians. Consumerism and ecological despotism will end when modern man adopts a new ecological morality by returning to the rest of communion with God (Muthiah 2015).

## Conclusion

Sunday was the new creation of Christianity based on a unique and spiritual concept of rest. All the patristic texts presented have a common ideological background. They all highlight the spiritual dimension of Sunday rest, the medium of believers' communion with the risen Christ and a real foretaste of the happiness of eternal life. The rest that the Christian Sunday proposes and brings to the world is an entirely new concept and reality, because it does not imply a

lack of work, but calls for an intensely spiritual activity in which the taste of 'God's rest' presupposes and implies. Until the 4th century, Christians could only have this spiritual experience of rest in God in their personal lives. After the time of Constantine the Great who institutionalized Sunday as a day of rest, the theology of Sunday developed and the rich ideas affirmed by the church fathers in their commentaries are nothing but a processing and interpretation of the vision of the early church with a mystagogical and missionary purpose. At the same time, these ideas are aimed at counteracting the tendencies of secularisation of Christian life that began to manifest themselves immediately after the freedom given to Christians by the Edict of Mediolanum.

In the contemporary world, the rediscovery of Sunday rest as rest in God can be a way out of the deep crises of modernity and a form of resistance and an alternative to today's consumerism and ecological despotism.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The author has declared that no competing interest exists.

### Author's contributions

C.V. is the sole author of this research study.

### Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

### Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

### Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

## References

- Adriaen, M. & Ballerini, P.A., 1957, *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam*, CCL 14, Brepols, Turnhout.
- Allender, D.B., 2009, *Sabbath: The ancient practices*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN.
- Baab, L.M., 2005, *Sabbath keeping: Finding freedom in the rhythms of rest*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.
- Bauckham, R., 2011, *Living with other creatures: Green exegesis and theology*, Baylor University Press, Waco, TX.
- Böhmer, J., 1931, *Der christliche Sonntag nach Ursprung und Geschichte*, Klein, Leipzig.

- Brattston, D.W.T., 2017, *Sabbath and Sunday among the earliest Christians: When was the day of public worship?* Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene, OR.
- Bruiggemann, W., 2017, *Sabbath as resistance*, John Knox Press, Westminster.
- Buchanan, M., 2006, *The rest of God: Restoring your soul by restoring Sabbath*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN.
- Camelot, P.T. (ed.), 1951, *Ignace d'Antioche, Polycarpe de Smyrne, Lettres, Martyre de Polycarpe, Sources Chretiennes*, Cerf, Paris.
- Danielou, J., 1957, 'La fete des Tabernacles dans l'exégèse', *Studia Patristica* 1, 262–279.
- Danielou, J., 1965, 'Le dimanche comme huitième jour', in B. Botte (ed.), *Le dimanche*, Lex Orandi 39, pp. 61–89, Cerf, Paris.
- Deane-Drummond, C., 2011, *A primer in ecotheology: Theology for a fragile earth (cascade companions)*, Cascade Books, Eugene, OR.
- Dekkers, E. & Fraipont, J. (eds.), 1956, *Augustinus, Enarrationes in Psalmos I-L*, CCL 39, Brepols, Turnhout.
- Doutreleau, L. (ed.), 2001, *Origene, Homelies sur les Nombres III*, Cerf, Paris.
- Frankenmölle, H., 2006, *Frühjudentum und Urchristentum. Vorgeschichte – Verlauf – Auswirkungen (4. Jahrhundert v.Chr. bis 4. Jahrhundert n.Chr.) Studienbücher Theologie 5*, W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart.
- Funk, F.X., 1905, *Didascalia et Constitutiones apostolorum*, n.p., Padeborn.
- Gillmor, D.A., 1996, 'The ecological crisis and Judaeo-Christian religion', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 85(339), 261–270.
- Goodspeed, E.J. (ed.), 1915, *Justinus Martyr, Dialogus cum Tryphone, Die ältesten Apologeten*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen.
- Grund, A., 2011, *Die Entstehung des Sabbats: Seine Bedeutung für Israels Zeitkonzept und Erinnerungskultur*, FAT 75, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen.
- Haag, E., 1991, *Vom Sabbat zum Sonntag eine bibeltheologische Studie*, Paulinus Verlag, Trier.
- Hartel, G. (ed.), 1871, *S. Thasci Caecili Cypriani opera omnia*, CSEL 3, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum, vol.III, Bibliopola Academiae Litterarum Caesareae Vindobonensis.
- Hartenstein, F., 2004, 'Der Sabbat als Zeichen und heilige Zeit. Zur Theologie des Ruhetages im Alten Testament', in M. Ebner (ed.), *Das Fest: Jenseits des Alltags. Jahrbuch für biblische Theologie*, pp. 83–102, Neukirchener, Neukirchen-Vluyn.
- Heikel, I.A. (ed.), 1902, *Eusebius Werke I. Vita Constantini, De laudibus Constantini, Constantini imperatoris oratio ad sanctorum coetum*, GCS 7/1, J.C. Hinrichs, Leipzig.
- Holl, K. (ed.), 1915, *Epiphanius*, vols. 1–3, Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller (GCS), Leipzig.
- Huber, H., 1958, *Geist und Buchstabe der Sonntagsruhe. Eine historisch-theologische Untersuchung über das Verbot der knechtlichen Arbeit von der Urkirche bis auf Thomas von Aquin*, Studia Theologiae moralis et pastoralis IV, Otto Müller, Salzburg.
- Jenni, E., 1956, *Die theologische Begründung des Sabbatgebotes im Alten Testament*, Theologische Studien 46, Evangelischer Verlag, Zollikon-Zürich.
- Jeremias, J., 2015, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen.
- Johnson Leese, J.J., 2018, *Christ, creation and the cosmic goal of redemption: A study of Pauline creation theology as read by Irenaeus and applied to ecotheology*, The Library of New Testament Studies Book 580, T&T Clark, London.
- Köckert, M., 2004, *Leben in Gottes Gegenwart. Studien zum Verständnis des Gesetzes im Alten Testament*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen.
- Kraft, R.A., 1965, 'Some notes on Sabbath observance in early Christianity', *Andrews University Seminar Notes* 3(1), 18–33.
- Kraft, R.A. & Prigent, P. (eds.), 1971, *Épître de Barnabé. Introduction, traduction et notes par Pierre Prigent. – Texte grec établi et présenté par Robert A. Kraft*, Sources Chretiennes 172, pp. 72–218, Cerf, Paris.
- Krüger, P., 1959, *Codex Iustinianus III in: Corpus iuris civilis II*, Lang, Berlin.
- Lukács, O., 2020, *Sabbath in the making: A study of the inner-biblical interpretation of the Sabbath commandment*, Peeters, Leuven.
- Muthiah, R.A., 2015, *The Sabbath experiment: Spiritual formation for living in a non-stop world*, Cascade Books, Eugene, OR.
- Paschos, P.B., 1996, *E9 á996B.s κα9 μαρτυρία, Υμναγιολογικά Κείμενα και Μελέτες 3*, Εκδόσεις Αρμός, Αθήνα.
- Peichl, H., 1958, *Der Tag des Herrn. Die Heiligung des Sonntags im Wandel der Zeit*, Herder, Wien.
- Pruche, B. (ed.), 1968, *Basile de Césarée, Sur le Saint-Esprit*, Sources Chretiennes 17bis, Cerf, Paris.
- Rahmani, I.E., 1899, *Testamentum Domini nostri Jesu Christi*, Sumptibus, Kirchheim.
- Reifferscheid, A. & Wissowa, G. (eds.), 1890, *Tertullianus, De spectaculis, De idololatria, Ad nationes, De testimonio animae, Scorpiace, De oratione, De baptismo, De pudicitia, De ieiunio adversus psychicos, De anima*, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum vol XX, Bibliopola Academiae Litterarum Caesareae Vindobonensis, viewed n.d., from <https://archive.org/details/corpuscriptoru24wissgoog/page/n4/mode/2up?view=theater>.
- Rordorf, W.A., 1962, *Der Sonntag Geschichte des Ruhe- und Gottesdiensttages im ältesten Christentum*, Zwingli Verlag, Zurich.
- Rordorf, W.A., 1972, *Sabbat und Sonntag in der Alten Kirche. Traditio Christiana*, Texte und Kommentare zur patristischen Theologie 2, Theologischer Verlag, Zürich.
- Sagnard, F. (ed.), 1948, *Clement d'Alexandrie, Extraits de Theodote*, Sources Chretiennes 23, Cerf, Paris.
- Scarlata, M.W., 2019, *Sabbath rest: The beauty of God's rhythm for a digital age*, SCM Press, London.
- Skillen, J.W., 2019, *God's Sabbath with creation: Vocations fulfilled, the glory unveiled*, Wipf and Stock. Ebook, Eugene, OR.
- Stählin, O. (ed.), 1906, *Clemens Alexandrinus II*, Stromata I–VI, Hinrichs, Leipzig.
- Wijngaarde, I.A., 2015, *A Sabbath journey from genesis to revelation*, Promise Ministry. Ebook, Groningen.
- Wirzba, N. & Berry, W., 2006, *Living the Sabbath (The Christian practice of everyday life): Discovering the rhythms of rest and delight*, Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, MI.