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Pentecost, commonly called Whitsunday

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RELEVANCE TO ETERNITY

LAST year it was reported that the Chinese government had decreed a week-long national holiday in order to supply the national economy's need for a boost in consumer spending. As in a reflection, the adoption of free-market capitalism by the Chinese Communist dictatorship (under the wonderful official euphemism, 'socialism with Chinese characteristics') shows us something about our own culture. In modern societies, time – including time off from work - is organized primarily to serve the economic processes of production and consumption. Christmas and Thanksgiving find a place in our public life in part because they provide an enormous boost to consumer spending; Lent, not a consumer-friendly season, disappears under the shadow of Mardi Gras; Saint Patrick's Day, not because there is a great deal of popular devotion to the Apostle of the Irish, but because it gives a big boost to the hospitality industry. Civic holidays like Memorial Day and Presidents' Day have been annexed to the nearest weekend, even though this detracts from their civic character, largely because it facilitates consumption of goods and services.

As it always has and always will, the world organizes time for the sake of worldly purposes; and this is not always a bad thing by any means. (Free-market capitalism alone is not sufficient for human happiness; but its efficient organization of time to serve economic growth has lifted, and is still lifting, countless millions out of very real misery.) But there is a worrisome tendency in the all-encompassing efficiency of modern 'time-management'. If our time is organized chiefly in terms of time invested in production and time off for consumption, then the institutions of family, of church, and state will be squeezed to the margins or themselves absorbed into patterns of production and consumption. ('Spirituality', for instance, has already become just another commodity in the American religious marketplace.) Unlike those of optimistic worldly temper, Christians will find this cause for concern. For we are those to whom the apostle says, "Seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth; for ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God" (Colossians 3). We cannot be like those "whose god is their belly...who mind earthly things", because "our citizenship is in heaven" (Philippians 3).

It will not do, therefore, for Christians to allow themselves and the way they use their time to be governed by purely worldly interests. One of the ancient prayers of the church asks that "we may so pass through things temporal, that we lose not the things eternal". The way we

organize our time cannot be dictated simply by worldly ambitions and appetites: it must be organized in such a way that it becomes the means of our attainment to the eternal good. As Fr. Patrick Bright put it in his sermon here two weeks ago, "we are not called to make the church relevant to the times. We are called to make the times relevant to the eternal message of Christ".

Precisely that - making time relevant to eternity - is the supremely practical and necessary purpose behind the annual cycle of days, weeks, and seasons, which is called the Christian Year. In observing the great festivals of Christmas, Epiphany, Easter, Ascension, Whitsunday, and Trinity Sunday, the feasts of the Apostles and Evangelists, Angels and Saints, their preparatory fasts and celebratory octaves, as well as the weekly festival of Sunday, the Church defines the time in which we live and through which we pass on our way to eternity in terms of Christ, and what he has done for us, and what he does in us, in his own person, through his Spirit and the witness of the saints. And as the pressure of modern economic logic on our use of time increases, it is all the more important that Christians adhere as much as possible (not merely as much as convenient) to this Christ-centered cycle of feast and fast, of high day and holy day. When we reserve Sunday and holy day for the service of God, when we give God the first-fruits of our time each week and season, we are reminded of that which the world would have us forget: that we have an eternal destiny; that our true home is not here in this world, but in the Kingdom of God, which we enter, here and now, through the faith and worship of Christ. And therein we are stirred up to the holy desire that we may so pass through things temporal, that we lose not the things eternal. We dare to hope that we may make our times relevant to eternity.

The Church's year has its origins in the religion of ancient Israel, in the creation ordinance of the seven day week, its seventh-day Sabbath (Genesis 1.1-2.3; Exodus 20.8-11); and in the Mosaic ordinances of Passover (Easter) and Pentecost (Whitsunday). In the New Testament, these ordinances were fulfilled and transmuted in Christ. The weekly day of worship shifted from the seventh-day Sabbath, the memorial of creation, to the first day Lord's Day, as a memorial of his resurrection, the new creation. The Passover commemoration of Israel's redemption from Egyptian slavery became the Easter commemoration of mankind's redemption from the bondage of sin. The commemoration on Pentecost of the giving of the Law to Israel at Sinai became the Whitsunday celebration of the giving of the Spirit to the Church at Zion. Although the details are obscure, all of this seems to have developed fairly quickly, beginning in New Testament times. By the end of the fourth century, the forty-day Lenten fast before Easter, and the feasts of Christmas, Epiphany, Candlemas, and Ascension Day were widely observed. The only remaining major pieces, Advent and Septuagesima, were added in the next two or three centuries. This structure, elaborated or simplified at times through subsequent centuries, is - along with the Bible itself, the Creeds, and the great Councils, which defined the fundamental Christian doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation - part of a Christian's fundamental religious inheritance from the early Church, and is not to be despised.

By our use of this ancient system of organizing time, we stand in continuity with the communion of saints, rather than breaking with them in favor of some (doubtless ingenious) fabrication of our own. By

aligning ourselves with "the old paths" (Jeremiah 6.16), we align ourselves with the historic faith and worship of the church, not vaguely and abstractly, but in the concrete particulars of how we organize our time. Such "ancient continuance" (Richard Hooker's phrase) preserves us from the tyranny of fad and fashion, the magpie lust for the shiny and new, which is destructive of the spiritual life. It preserves us from being locked in by a perspective and outlook and use of time which is shaped only by worldly ends. And it opens us up to greater possibilities than this world knows or dreams of.

(To be continued...)

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