

## Divine Rest and the Environmental Imperative

By Lincoln E. Steed

If any people should have an understanding of the connection between end-time prophecies and the environmental catastrophe engulfing the world today, it would have to be Seventh-day Adventists. After all, the first of the three angels of Revelation calls for all to “fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment has come, and worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water” (Rev 14:7). We have here the theme of imminent judgment. We have the wide gamut of creation included and, with the invocation of creation authority, an easy connection to the memorial of that act—the Sabbath.

We should not see the Sabbath in doctrinal isolation. We may be tempted to portray it as a singular issue, and a false Sabbath imposed with a narrow perversity. The Sabbath is indeed more than a day—it is the signature of the Creator God, and its significance must by definition reach throughout creation. Amazon.com currently describes *Divine Rest for Human Restlessness*, a publication on the Sabbath, this way:

a theological reflection on the relevance of the biblical Sabbath for today. The study shows the values of the Sabbath provide a divine remedy to such contemporary problems as stress, restlessness, ecological crisis, marital tension, human rights and competitive pressures.<sup>1</sup>

This thinking on the Sabbath permeates three recent papal documents: *Dies Domini* (1998), *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), and *Laudato si* (2015), and provides the theological underpinning for much of what Pope Francis shared with the joint session of the United States Congress in September 2015.

In *Dies Domini*, Pope John Paul II resoundingly affirms the seventh-day biblical Sabbath. He then introduces the authority of the early Christian church to change the day observed to Sunday. That done, the document resumes its exaltation of the Sabbath. Proof texting the seventh-day Sabbath misses the point of the document. Sabbath is unquestioned and still valid. The issue is one of authority and tradition.

In *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict assumes the authority of his office to address all the political and social ills of the larger world. He does not mention the Sabbath, but rather the need for divine spiritual rest to solve issues of national sovereignty, economic crisis, capital and labor issues, poverty, and so on. He concludes by calling for a global authority with “the power to act and to enforce.” In reviewing this document, the secular *New Republic* magazine gives it high marks, but observes that in accepting the document, the pope comes with it!

With the release in 2015 of the Encyclical *Laudato si*, Pope Francis brings a wholistic solution to the world’s ills (sometimes with some pantheistic overtones), most particularly to the environmental crisis, with the imperative of Sabbath rest. It is so self-evident that we will follow this with a sequential string of quotations from the document. They bear heavily on the theological rationale for the document.

1. “LAUDATO SI’, mi’ Signore”—“Praise be to you, my Lord”. In the words of this beautiful canticle, Saint Francis of Assisi reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us. “Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs”.

2. This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she “groans in travail” (Rom 8:22). We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. Gen 2:7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters.

[3] Now, faced as we are with global environmental deterioration, I wish to address every person living on this planet. In my Apostolic Exhortation Evangeli Gaudium, I wrote to all the members of the Church with the aim of encouraging ongoing missionary renewal. In this Encyclical, I would like to enter into dialogue with all people about our common home.

[5] The destruction of the human environment is extremely serious, not only because God has entrusted the world to us men and women, but because human life is itself a gift which must be defended from various forms of debasement. Every effort to protect and improve our world entails profound changes in “lifestyles, models of production and consumption, and the established structures of power which today govern societies”. [...] Authentic human development has a moral character. It presumes full respect for the human person, but it must also be concerned for the world around us and “take into account the nature of each being and of its mutual connection in an ordered system.” [...] Accordingly, our human ability to transform reality must proceed in line with God’s original gift of all that is.

53. These situations have caused sister earth, along with all the abandoned of our world, to cry out, pleading that we take another course. Never have we so hurt and mistreated our common home as we have in the last two hundred years. Yet we are called to be instruments of God our Father, so that our planet might be what he desired when he created it and correspond with his plan for peace, beauty and fullness.

68. This responsibility for God’s earth means that human beings, endowed with intelligence, must respect the laws of nature and the delicate equilibria existing between the creatures of this world, for “he commanded and they were created; and he established them for ever and ever; he fixed their bounds and he set a law which cannot pass away” (Ps 148:5b–6). The laws found in the Bible dwell on relationships, not only among individuals but also with other living beings. “You shall not see your brother’s donkey or his ox fallen down by the way and withhold your help... If you chance to come upon a bird’s nest in any tree or on the ground, with young ones or eggs and the mother sitting upon the young or upon the eggs; you shall not take the mother with the young” (Dt 22:4, 6). Along these same lines, rest on the seventh day is meant not only for human beings, but also so “that your ox and your donkey may have rest” (Ex 23:12). Clearly, the Bible has no place for a tyrannical anthropocentrism unconcerned for other creatures.

71. Although “the wickedness of man was great in the earth” (Gen 6:5) and the Lord “was sorry that he had made man on the earth” (Gen 6:6), nonetheless, through Noah, who remained innocent and just, God decided to open a path of salvation. In this way he gave humanity the chance of a new beginning. All it takes is one good person to restore hope! The biblical tradition clearly shows that this renewal

entails recovering and respecting the rhythms inscribed in nature by the hand of the Creator. We see this, for example, in the law of the Sabbath. On the seventh day, God rested from all his work. He commanded Israel to set aside each seventh day as a day of rest, a Sabbath, (cf. Gen 2:2–3; Ex 16:23; 20:10). Similarly, every seven years, a sabbatical year was set aside for Israel, a complete rest for the land (cf. Lev 25:1–4), when sowing was forbidden and one reaped only what was necessary to live on and to feed one’s household (cf. Lev 25:4–6). Finally, after seven weeks of years, which is to say forty-nine years, the Jubilee was celebrated as a year of general forgiveness and “liberty throughout the land for all its inhabitants” (cf. Lev 25:10). This law came about as an attempt to ensure balance and fairness in their relationships with others and with the land on which they lived and worked. At the same time, it was an acknowledgment that the gift of the earth with its fruits belongs to everyone.

202. Many things have to change course, but it is we human beings above all who need to change. We lack an awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone. This basic awareness would enable the development of new convictions, attitudes and forms of life. A great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge stands before us, and it will demand that we set out on the long path of renewal.

214. Political institutions and various other social groups are also entrusted with helping to raise people’s awareness. So too is the Church. All Christian communities have an important role to play in ecological education. It is my hope that our seminaries and houses of formation will provide an education in responsible simplicity of life, in grateful contemplation of God’s world, and in concern for the needs of the poor and the protection of the environment. **Because the stakes are so high, we need institutions empowered to impose penalties for damage inflicted on the environment.** [Emphasis supplied] But we also need the personal qualities of self-control and willingness to learn from one another.

237. On Sunday, our participation in the Eucharist has special importance. Sunday, like the Jewish Sabbath, is meant to be a day which heals our relationships with God, with ourselves, with others and with the world. Sunday is the day of the Resurrection, the “first day” of the new creation, whose first fruits are the Lord’s risen humanity, the pledge of the final transfiguration of all created reality. It also proclaims “man’s eternal rest in God”.<sup>[168]</sup> In this way, Christian spirituality incorporates the value of relaxation and festivity. We tend to demean contemplative rest as something unproductive and unnecessary, but this is to do away with the very thing which is most important about work: its meaning. We are called to include in our work a dimension of receptivity and gratuity, which is quite different from mere inactivity. Rather, it is another way of working, which forms part of our very essence. It protects human action from becoming empty activism; it also prevents that unfettered greed and sense of isolation which make us seek personal gain to the detriment of all else. The law of weekly rest forbade work on the seventh day, “so that your ox and your donkey may have rest, and the son of your maidservant, and the stranger, may be refreshed” (Ex 23:12). Rest opens our eyes to the larger picture and gives us renewed sensitivity to the rights of others. And so the day of rest, centred on the Eucharist, sheds it light on the whole week, and motivates us to greater concern for nature and the poor.

243. At the end, we will find ourselves face to face with the infinite beauty of God (cf. 1 Cor 13:12), and be able to read with admiration and happiness the mystery of the universe, which with us will share in unending plenitude. **Even now we are journeying towards the sabbath of eternity, the new Jerusalem, towards our common home in heaven** [emphasis supplied]. Jesus says: “I make all things new” (Rev 21:5). Eternal life will be a shared experience of awe, in which each creature, resplendently transfigured, will take its rightful place and have something to give those poor men and women who will have been liberated once and for all.<sup>2</sup>

So close to the truth, this appropriation of all that is good in Sabbath is applied to the “Eucharistic” Sunday! The stakes presented are very high—nothing less than the survival of our planet. The Sabbath imperative is all-embracing, as it should be. But how will our insistence that Sabbath can only be on the seventh day be received by those who accept the Pope’s challenge? Why, he gave the answer in his speech to Congress. “We must reject,” he said, “all forms of fundamentalism and extremism.” And if you think he meant Islamic fundamentalism you haven’t been listening.

The pope’s speech to Congress only makes sense when you read the last two documents cited. He was indeed lecturing the capitalists here in the United States and he was calling for a Sabbatical solution to our selfish ways. And he was speaking as one with authority. The challenge is for us to show that no man has the authority to change God’s law.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.amazon.com/Divine-Rest-Human-Restlessness-Theological/dp/1930987013>.

<sup>2</sup> [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html).