

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Rest

There are some questions that have only one answer. *Would you like to do this pile of ironing* must qualify. So, usually, must *May I pour you a large gin and tonic?*; and so must *What about a fortnight in Clacton?* Another candidate, I increasingly find, is *Would you like to have a rest?*

Sabbath or Sabbatical?

The word *Sabbath* is not a happy one in English, because of the kill-joy connotations of Mrs Proudie's campaign against trains on Sunday, and the reduction of the Lord's Day to a dreary and false decorum in some circles. Religiosity is a killer of real religion, and the English Sabbath is a real killer as well. Closing the pubs in Wales, tying up the swings in the park - it gets God a bad name, which is what the blasphemy laws were trying to avoid. On the other hand, the word *sabbatical* - which means some professional person being given time off to do something special and restorative - has a very positive sound to it.

Is A Change As Good As A Rest?

No. It may be the next best thing, because routine can support us but it can also lull us to sleep and kill us. But rest is something more. It is the retreat from *defining ourselves by what we can do*, into *defining ourselves by who we are*. When I go tearing through some foreign country searching for someone else's artistic works, I'm experiencing the excitement of achievement. I can work the system, get through the travel, read the signs, find my way, get there and do it. It may be exhilarating, but *it's still work*. I'm still on a treadmill, getting prizes. Resting is quite different. When I rest, I say: I'm not looking outwards, I'm stopping. I'm taking time for myself, I'm being me. Now ask the question again: *would you like to have a rest?* Not a trip, or a visit, or a project, but a time of repose? We speak of roast beef *resting* for half an hour before carving, so that the juices which have gathered to the bones can flow back to the meat. That's a nice image. St Augustine spoke about rest most eloquently of all: he had experienced a lifetime of tremendous variety, travel, influence: but he suddenly retired in search of what he termed *otium* - rest, as opposed to *negotium*, which means no rest, business. It was from this experience of rest that he found his way to faith - and to the totally busy life of a Catholic

Bishop in North Africa, for which he is remembered. Out of rest came work and responsibility for others.

The Rest Of God

The point about the Sabbath is that it shares in the repose of God, the Almighty who does not have need to work. For him all things are possible, but he is at total liberty, under no compulsion. When the Bible says *God rested on the seventh day*, it does not imply that he needed to rest, or that he was impelled to work on the sixth day. His work and his rest are equally expressions of his freedom. Our Sabbath comes after we have obeyed his command to *fill the earth and conquer it* - the divine charter for human work and creativity; and we should see in this rest a consummation, a reward, and a terminus toward which we can look with longing. Competent work is not an end in itself, but a means towards the end, which is restful, fulfilled life, where we can love and be loved in return. We should not be so trapped in the imperfect, unfinished, unfinishable "work that is never done", that we relegate the concept of rest to that exhausted oblivion which speaks of death. We owe ourselves, and the God who commands us (we workaholics *need* commanding) to share his rest, something better. If our Sabbath is what it should be, then it will be a time of powerful joy in God and in all that he has made: a day of which the Son of Man is Lord.

Fr Philip