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Promote family and community with a common day of rest

Christopher Dodson

The Forum newspaper recently gave a “leafy spurge” to “all those North Dakotans who cling to the myth that partial Sunday opening (noon for most businesses) somehow honors a Sabbath day.”

The editorial went on to espouse a libertarian view of the marketplace: “Merchants should be able to open their doors whenever they choose. North Dakotans who don’t want to shop on Sunday — morning or any other time on that day — can stay home or in church. Others will want to shop. It should be their choice, not the state’s.”

The Forum’s argument reflects a misunderstanding of the law’s purpose and the relationship between government, business and the human community. Let’s start with the first. The purpose of North Dakota’s Sunday closing law is not to impose times of worship. Nor is it to demand adherence to religious doctrine. The purpose of the law is to preserve the common good by ensuring that society is not overtaken by work and profit.

The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church puts it this way: “The memory and the experience of the Sabbath constitute a barrier against becoming slaves to work, whether voluntarily or by force, and against every kind of exploitation, hidden or evident. In fact, the Sabbath rest . . . was instituted in defense of the poor. Its function is also that of freeing people from the antisocial degeneration of human work.”

Humans and communities need periods of rest and free time that allow them to tend to family, cultural, social and religious life. Only when communities set aside time devoted to these functions can human persons prosper and develop. Thus, the compendium notes that rest from work is a human right and that a common day of rest is necessary for the promotion of the family and community.

Significantly, even the compendium notes that the institution of the Lord’s Day “contributes” to the time of rest and recreation. The need for rest and family exists prior to the Sabbath. The Forum, however, gets this backward, asserting that the time for rest and recreation was created for the Sabbath. Notably, courts upholding Sunday closing laws have recognized what the Forum does not — that the laws serve a secular, not religious purpose.

The Forum also misunderstands how economic forces, without some regulation, can create a society enslaved to work. Without common periods of rest, individuals, families and communities eventually suffer. Indeed, even economic productivity itself suffers.

Rather than restricting individual freedom, closing laws liberate and free people from the antisocial degeneration of human work. Indeed, the need for closing laws is even greater in societies like ours that place a high value on economic liberty.

Economic liberty can only thrive in healthy communities and a community that races to the bottom in its demands on workers, especially those of less means, is not a healthy community. For that reason, the compendium notes that: "Public authorities have the duty to ensure that, for reasons of economic productivity, citizens are not denied time for rest and divine worship."

The right to common rest cannot be left to businesses alone. This was evident when a bill was introduced this last session to allow automobile dealerships to open Sunday morning. The main opponents of the bill were dealerships, not churches. They understood that if one dealership is allowed to open, they all will be forced to open in order to stay competitive, and that doing so would create hardships for their employees and their families.

Sunday closing laws are not about honoring the Sabbath day. They are about honoring people and families.

Christopher Dodson is executive director of the North Dakota Catholic Conference. The conference's website is ndcatholic.org.