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Time is sacred

The Government has recently concluded a consultation about the Sunday trading laws, and it seems probable that this parliament will legislate to allow a more flexible approach to shops opening on Sundays. We are told that this will boost both employment and economic growth. It is more than 20 years since the “Keep Sunday Special” campaign fought against the legalisation of Sunday trading, and it is already clear that the Church of England and the union that represents shop workers are gearing up to resist further liberalisation.

Catholics may well feel themselves on the sidelines in this discussion. After all, sabbatarianism is mainly a Protestant concern. But this question is not just about Sunday observance. It touches on what it means to be human, as well as what it means for the world to be God’s Creation, governed by His laws.

The first chapter of the Book of Genesis describes the Creation of the world in six days; on the seventh God rested, and surveyed His work, pronouncing it good. The inspired author stresses that

the seven-day week, and the rest on one day in seven, is built into the structure of Creation from the beginning, rather than imposed on it as a matter of convenience. Furthermore, the author shows us that time is not simply a succession of moments, but an expression of the Divine Will. God is the creator of time and is its master. More-

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over, given that we who live in time can know God, time is sacred.

Parliament will legislate as it has done in the past and regulate how we spend our time. This is only right and proper, and we should remember that human autonomy in this and other matters is a gift of God. Yet human autonomy should respect the natural law, and the structure of the world as His Creation.

Time is His gift to us, and one day we will have to give an account of how we have used it.

In this matter the Church has not provided the state with a shining example. The Church cannot, and thankfully has not tried, to abolish Sundays; that Sunday begins at dusk the previous day is quite in keeping with biblical understanding. But the Church has tinkered with important dates, and damaged our understanding of salvific time in the process. No longer do we celebrate the Ascension 40 days after Easter, or Pentecost nine days after Ascension. Epiphany no longer falls on Twelfth Night, something that would have distressed and dumbfounded Shakespeare.

These changes have been deeply unpopular, as has Sunday trading, and the same excuse has been used in both cases: convenience. Both moves represent a sad sign of our desire to mould God to our own wishes, rather than to let ourselves be moulded to His. He alone is sovereign. Our subjection to time is a reminder of that.

A risky move

Pope Francis returned from his summer holidays with yet another controversial idea for Catholics to chew over. Divorced and remarried people are “not, in fact excommunicated ... and they absolutely must not be treated as if they were,” he told a general audience in St Peter’s.

The Holy Father’s words were controversial not because of what he said plainly but because of what they possibly implied. We know that divorced and remarried Catholics do not incur formal excommunication. But they are barred from receiving Holy Communion. Liberal bishops, led by Cardinal Kasper, want to relax the rules, and will argue for this at the

October Synod on the Family. Conservative bishops will oppose any change. The Synod, like its predecessor last October, is likely to be a fractious affair, with much leaking to the press.

Where does Pope Francis stand on this? On the face of it, he seems to favour some sort of change – but, on the other hand, he did not specifically talk about the Eucharist and invoked St John Paul II on the subject of the need for “discernment” in dealing with failed marriages. So there is confusion about his plans.

However, as the respected Vatican commentator John Allen noted, there is a possibility that the Pope will authorise bishops around the world to

invite divorced and remarried on a case-by-case basis.

This is a move that could backfire. Bishops will leave decisions up to priests, some of whom will be tempted to say yes to everyone. Other priests could be drawn into bitter disputes – at which point some sort of judicial framework will need to be set up. This is not a recipe for pastoral wellbeing: to quote Allen, asking clergy to make these judgments “may only compound the ugliness” of a failed marriage. We hope that the Holy Father has thought through the consequences of changing the existing rules – for it is he, rather than the Synod Fathers, who will ultimately decide this matter.