The observance of the Sabbath is intended to be life affirming

France de Sales asks rhetorically: “What was the motive of the Incarnation?” and he responds by saying that it was to teach us how to live according to reason. In other words, for him the Incarnation was not intended so much to divinize us but to make us more human because the more human we are in the most ennobling sense, the more godlike we become. This notion is at the very heart of his Francis de Sales’ Christian humanism.

We have in today’s gospel an excellent example of how Jesus teaches us to be more human by being more reasonable. The Pharisees were unreasonable in their legalistic interpretation of the observance of the Sabbath as Jesus reasonably and convincingly demonstrates. The legalists would deny food to hungry and needy people on the Sabbath merely to follow the law, forgetting or losing sight of the reason for the Sabbath laws in the first place, namely, for having the opportunity to work on strengthening our relationship with God. And Jesus demonstrated by his life, works and teaching that we can not strengthen our relationship with God if we do not work on bettering our relationships with one another. In other words, by assisting the needy and supplying for their needs, Jesus views this as honoring God and strengthening our relationship with God on the Sabbath. For Jesus, the Sabbath is intended to be life enhancing, and life affirming, not life limiting and life constricting as the legalistic Pharisees would have it.

As a law student in Padua, Francis de Sales realized the inherent dangers of legalism and set forth in his Spiritual Exercises the principle of overcoming this danger: “There is no law however general that does not have its exceptions, save this: Nothing against God.” For him law can degenerate to legalism when detached from love and common sense or reason. He expresses the relationship between law and love in the following way: “we must have no other law nor constraint but that of love.” (OEA, 13, p. 184). This is the way that he lived Jesus and avoided a legalistic attitude.

We have seen the tragic consequences of a legalistic attitude in our country toward the unborn, especially regarding so-called partial-birth abortion. A federal judge readily admitted that the procedure was barbaric and gruesome and yet declared the ban on such a procedure to be unconstitutional because it supposedly did not have a safeguard to protect the health of the mother! This opinion seemingly ignored the real health threat to the mother that such a procedure presents. In many instances, it appears that such legalism trumps reason and common sense and is patently not life affirming but life constricting and terribly destructive of human life.
Jesus, in stating that man is not made for the Sabbath but that the Sabbath is made for man and declaring himself to be Lord of the Sabbath wants to teach us how to establish the right relationship with him and the Father and with one another. He is declaring unequivocally that keeping God’s law must always be life affirming. And he comes to us in the Eucharistic celebration as the Bread of Life, nourishing and strengthening us to affirm life in the most needy, the most vulnerable and the most innocent.

One writer has graphically described the face of God Jesus has revealed to us: “A God who creates is a God who has made a commitment to life. God is therefore never indifferent to life. The God we worship is a life-giving God. In celebrating life, we encounter God; in worshipping God we celebrate life. For God is life” (Anthony Padovano, Belief in Human Life, p. 6).