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The Swiss Observer

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SWISS FEDERAL DAY OF PRAYER

On the third Sunday in September the Federal Day of Thanksgiving, Atonement and Prayer will be held in Switzerland. The Swiss people will celebrate this national church festival without regard to religious denominations. The civic encyclopedia of the Swiss Confederation tells us that the *Protestant* Diet instituted the Federal Day of Prayer by way of thanksgiving for the deliverance from the Thirty Years' War in 1639. On 1st August 1832 the *Federal* Diet decreed: "The universal Federal Day of Thanksgiving, Atonement and Prayer shall in future and beginning with this year (1832) be celebrated by all the States of the Confederation at the same time on the third Sunday of the autumn month".

Thus the "Bettag" has been held for a hundred and thirty years. The world has changed and with it no doubt also customs concerning the Federal Day of Prayer. In many quarters it is realised that much has been lost. The Swiss Society for Public Utility ("Schweizerische Gemeinnützige Gesellschaft") issued an appeal last year signed by some forty organisations in Switzerland ranging from motoring organisations and the doctors' societies to political parties, women's clubs and the New Helvetic Society. The proclamation states that we the people of the twentieth century have surrendered our inner concentration and peace. "With it much else has gone astray: the safe foundation of faith, the possession of tranquillity and emotional equilibrium, and the enthusiasm for responsibility towards a wider community. The statement asked whether lost things could be found again. Perhaps not, but the Federal Day of Prayer afforded at least a chance. "Don't make any noise and don't get upset by noise! Use the quiet day for stocktaking of yourself, your family, your country. Somewhere a calm moment is waiting for you, be it in your home, or in the open, or in a church, wherever your path may lead you. The chance is there for you to find peace of mind again, faith and tranquillity as well as strength to carry responsibility. Our country and the world need it."

This appeal was not the only one. In the magazine of the Swiss Countrywomen's Association "Die Bäuerin" Konrad Maurer compared the Day of Prayer to a red traffic light which, however irksome, makes one stop in order not to meet with an accident. "The red light burns and calls: Stop! Wait! Reflect!" The writer recalled the good old days of a hundred years ago when every farmer followed the threefold crop rotation system. On the Day of Prayer there was the traditional lunch of plum flan and coffee, so as to enable the whole family including the servants to attend the long service and communion. And in the afternoon the whole family could attend the second church service. It was a day of real reflection and it was possible to take a new turn.

It used to be customary for many people to attend church on the Federal Day of Prayer even if they only rarely went to church during the year. But even this, the writer in "Die Bäuerin" maintained, had changed. Sunday has become a day of work, also the Federal Day of Prayer, and the car or the tractor have to be washed and plums must be bottled! Or one goes visiting because many restaurants and places of amusements are closed. And there is another possibility — the Comptoir in Lausanne is held around that time — and the cars fill the roads towards Lausanne, and there is no chance to meditate".

The Swiss Churches in London traditionally celebrate the Federal Day of Prayer the way it is customary at home. For us Swiss abroad, too, this day should be a red light which asks us to reflect, to take stock and to consider the two questions which the Federal Day of Thanksgiving, Atonement and Prayer asks: Where in our life is God? Where in our life are our fellow men? Can we still stop, relax and listen and let God give us a new readiness, a new purpose in life? If we can, we shall be able to face the green light of our every day activities with new faith and peace of mind.