

THE EASTER VIGIL

This “mother of all vigils” is the “greatest and most noble of all solemnities and it is to be unique in every single Church” (Missal). On this holy night, the Church keeps watch, celebrating the resurrection of Christ in the sacraments and awaiting his return in glory. It is the turning point of the Triduum, the Passover of the new covenant, which marks Christ’s passage from death to life. This is the night the Church awaits in vigil the Resurrection of the Lord, celebrating it with the sacraments of Christian initiation. The Christian tradition has however always recognised its character of expectation of the Lord’s eschatological coming. Therefore, the Easter Vigil does not correspond to the usual Saturday evening Mass and its character is unique in the cycle of the liturgical year.

Time of celebration: “The entire celebration of the Easter Vigil takes place at night. It should not begin before nightfall; it should end before daybreak on Sunday” (Missal). The Circular Letter Concerning the Preparation and Celebration of the Easter Feasts, issued by the Vatican in 1988, is even stronger by insisting that **the Easter Vigil must start only after it is dark**. The celebration of a Mass without the rites of the Easter Vigil is not allowed. The tabernacle is empty for the Easter Vigil. All bread that will be used for Holy Communion is to be consecrated at the Vigil, offering us the model of what should happen at every celebration of the Eucharist throughout the year.

The Service of Light (Lucernarium): In a suitable place outside the Church a “blazing fire” (*rogus ardens*) is to be prepared. The rubrics, however, acknowledge that when this cannot be done adaptations may be made. The candle should be made of wax, never be artificial, be renewed each year, be only one in number, and be of sufficiently large size that it may convey the truth that Christ is the light of the world. The candle is then prepared in rites which are no longer optional. The celebrant cuts a cross into the candle with a stylus. Then he makes the Greek letter *Alpha* above the cross, the letter *Omega* below it, and the four numerals of the current year between the arms of the cross, saying the words indicated. After these rites, the priest lights the candle from the new fire and says: *May the light of Christ, rising in glory, dispel the darkness of our hearts and minds.*

The organisation of the procession is more clearly described in the new Missale Romanum. One of the ministers takes burning coals from the fire and places them in a thurible and the priest, in the usual way, places incense into it. The deacon, or in his absence another appropriate minister, accepts the Easter candle from the celebrant and a procession is formed. The order of procession is the thurifer with smoking thurible, preceding the minister holding the candle, followed by the ministers and the priest and the people. All hold unlit candles. Just as the children of Israel were guided at night by the pillar of fire, so Christians follow the risen Christ.

The places at which the proclamation ‘*The Light of Christ*’ are sung are: at the door of the Church (after which the priest lights his candle), in the middle of the Church (after which all light their candles), and before the altar, facing the people. The Missal instructs the deacon to place the candle in a large candle stand prepared either next to the ambo or in the middle of the sanctuary.

The Exsultet

Before the Easter Proclamation, the priest gives his candle to one of the ministers and blesses incense as at the Gospel during Mass. Having asked for and received the blessing, the deacon announces the

Easter proclamation from the ambo or at a lectern. In the absence of a deacon the priest himself or another concelebrating priest may announce the Easter proclamation. If, however, a lay cantor announces the proclamation, the words, 'My dearest friends', up to the end of the invitation are omitted, along with the greeting, 'The Lord be with you'. (The Exsultet is traditionally sung to the Missal tone).

Liturgy of the Word

The proclamation of the Word of God is the fundamental element of the Easter Vigil. One of the unique aspects of the Easter Vigil is the recounting of the outstanding deeds of the history of salvation. These are related in seven readings from the Old Testament chosen from the law and the prophets and two from the New Testament, namely from the apostles and from the gospel. The faithful are encouraged to meditate on these readings by the singing of a responsorial psalm, followed by a silent pause, and then by the celebrant's prayer. The 3rd edition of the Roman Missal adds a sentence about the nine readings proposed, saying that **all of these must be read whenever it can be done**, so that the character of a Vigil which takes place over some duration of time can be observed. The number of readings may only be reduced where serious pastoral circumstances demand it. When the singing of the psalms is difficult in a parish where musical ability is limited, the number of psalms could be reduced to three, though the canticle of Moses following the third reading must always be sung. A parish might decide, for example, to opt for all seven Old Testament readings, but to omit the first two psalms, sing the canticle of Moses and then omit the next two psalms, thus just singing the canticle of Moses and two psalms. After the final reading and its prayer, the Gloria is intoned. The church bells and other bells are rung joyously.

The parts unique to the Vigil which should always be sung are:

the acclamations during the procession with the Paschal Candle (the Light of Christ);
the Easter Proclamation (Exsultet);
the Gospel acclamation (the 'alleluia' psalm);
the Litany of the Saints;
the acclamation after the blessing of water (Springs of Water).

Sacraments of Initiation

The planning for the baptismal liturgy should provide for its beauty and for the full preparation and participation of the assembly. Planners and ministers will have to work with both the Missal and the RCIA ritual books.

Christ's Passover and ours are given full expression when baptismal water is blessed in the font and when Christian initiation takes place at the Easter Vigil. Even if there are no candidates for baptism, the blessing of baptismal water should take place in parish churches. When adults are baptised at the Vigil, the liturgy attains its fullness, for there is the paschal mystery of the Lord's dying and rising in our midst. The fullness of the rite of baptism comes when immersion is possible (the pouring of water over the entire body). Parishes may want to work toward the fullness of this sign. Those who are baptised (excepting infants), including adults and children who have been catechised and those received into full communion with the Church, are to be confirmed immediately afterwards by the presiding priest at the Easter Vigil liturgy.

The Eucharist

Care should be taken that, particularly in regard to this night's celebration of the Eucharist, the liturgy is not hurried and all the rites and words are given their full force. The 3rd edition of the Roman Missal now incorporates the rubrics found in nos. 241-243 of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. These allow for a commemoration of the baptised and their godparents to be made in the Eucharistic Prayer. After Mass, the Blessed Sacrament is restored to the tabernacle.

Concluding Rites The Solemn Blessing for the Easter Vigil may be used. The deacon/priest dismisses the people with a dismissal form that includes a double alleluia. The double alleluia is also to be used for the dismissal at all Masses throughout the Octave of Easter.

EASTER SUNDAY

The Mass of Easter Day should be celebrated with great solemnity. The practice of celebrating baptismal Vespers is encouraged. At this celebration of Vespers psalms are sung and there is a procession to the font.

Sequence: The Easter Sequence (*Victimae paschali laudes*) is sung on Easter Sunday after the second reading and before the Gospel alleluia acclamation. The Sequence is also optional throughout the Octave of Easter. Metrical versions are available, for example "O Flock of Christ, your homage bring" and "Christ the Lord is risen today!"

Renewal of Baptismal Promises: The renewal of baptismal promises may replace the Creed on Easter Sunday. This is followed by a sprinkling of the people, with water blessed at the Easter Vigil.