

The Easter Vigil

Historical Background

The celebration of Easter begins on Holy Saturday any time after sundown. This is the holiest night of the year, as the Church, the Bride of Christ, remains awake to celebrate the “mother of all the holy vigils”, as St. Augustine called it.

During the first Christian centuries, believers gathered together throughout the whole Church to spend the entire night—from sundown to sunset—in prayers, readings, singing. They delighted in commemorating the great victory of Light over darkness that had taken place on this night, and greeting the Risen Lord at dawn of Easter day.

This all-night vigil was the true celebration of Easter. ***It was not merely a commemoration of a past event or even the celebration of a present reality. In large measure, it was also an anticipation of future glory, because the early Christians expected Christ to come again during this night.***

St. Jerome says: “At midnight a cry arose: ‘Behold, the Bridegroom comes. Go forth to meet Him.’” He says that Christians held fast to the tradition of the Apostles that during the Easter vigil no one was to leave before midnight, for all were waiting for the coming of Christ. After midnight when they felt He would not come, they were then to celebrate the feast.

This ancient apostolic tradition demonstrates that the mystery of redemption embraces the Final Coming. No celebration of Easter is complete that does not include a commemoration of the completion of Christ’s redemptive work.

Keeping vigil on this night, and celebrating the Paschal feast during the night was a practice that Christians took from the Jews, along with the Paschal feast itself. The Christian Easter fulfills the Jewish Passover. An important part of the Jewish Passover was the night-watch commemorating the Exodus: “Since that was a night of vigil on the part of the Lord to bring them out of the land of Egypt, this night must be one of vigil for the Lord on the part of all the Israelites throughout their generations.” (Exodus 12:42) God commanded them to observe the anniversary of this deliverance from Egypt as a festival day.

The whole congregation of Israel was to take part in the Passover feast and in the sacrifice that commemorated it. During the Passover meal the children asked the meaning of it and were told year after year: “It is because of what the Lord did for me when I left Egypt.”

Scripture continues: “It shall serve you as a sign on your hand and a memorial on your forehead in order that instruction about the Lord may be in your mouth—how the Lord with a strong hand brought you out of Egypt. So you must observe this institution at the proper time from year to year.” (Exodus 23:8-11)

Through this feast the people of Israel kept alive the memory of all that God had done for them—their deliverance from the slavery of Egypt and their birth as a holy nation, the People of God. It was on this night that Israel began to be.

When the Christians took over the feast of the Passover, they saw all this fulfilled in Christ. Like the Jews, they commemorated a deliverance but one mightier and more far-reaching than the Exodus from Egypt. They commemorated the mighty act of God—the death and resurrection of Christ, that had drawn them out of darkness into the Kingdom of God’s beloved Son.

This new and more glorious deliverance was associated with the night and with darkness. The death of Jesus took place in the darkness of the eclipse, and the resurrection happened during the night. When the women came to the tomb at dawn, it was already empty.

The Jewish Passover also celebrated their birth as a nation. The early Christians saw the resurrection of Christ from the grave as the birth of the Church. The Christian Passover likewise became the commemoration of the birth of the new People of God. This may be the reason why baptisms were celebrated during the Holy Saturday liturgy.

The Jews who kept vigil each year on Passover were not only recalling the Exodus of the past. They were holding themselves in readiness for the greater Exodus, the mightier deliverance that was to come. They ate the Passover standing, clothed for a journey, with walking staff in hand. When the Lord delivered them with outstretched arm, it was only the pledge of the future time when God would establish His Kingdom forever. The Jews looked forward to that as the true and final Passover, ushered in by the Messianic King.

So too the Christians not only commemorated *past events*, but they looked forward to the true and eternal Jerusalem, the Kingdom that would have no end. They knew we are pilgrims and strangers on earth. We seek the city that is above, the blessed hope and coming of Our Lord Jesus Christ who will establish us in glory with Him forever. We too await the resurrection of the body and the life of the world that is to come.

So we are not play-acting during the Easter vigil. We are doing on this one night of the year what we should be doing spiritually at all times—awaiting the coming of Our Lord Jesus Christ and the everlasting Easter festival of heaven. At Easter the Church is visibly and openly what she always is in the depths of her being: the Bride waiting for the coming of the Bridegroom.

The night vigil was celebrated for the first 1000 years of Christian history, but then abandoned in the West. (It was never abandoned in the East.) After the Council of Trent, it was actually put in the morning of Holy Saturday! Happily, we live in a time when it has been restored to its rightful, traditional place—the night of Holy Saturday.

The Blessing of the New Fire and Lighting of the Easter Candle

In the Jewish Passover celebration, the father of the family, or whoever presided, began the service by “blessing the lamp” with a prayer of thanksgiving to Yahweh, the creator of light. The early Church gave this Jewish custom a Christian meaning.

Ideally, this should take place outside the church, and in the open air. The words of the priest explain the meaning of this rite:

Dear brethren (brothers and sisters),
 on this most sacred night,
 in which our Lord Jesus Christ
 passed over from death to life,
 the Church calls upon her sons and daughters,
 scattered throughout the world,
 to come together to watch and pray.
 If we keep the memorial
 of the Lord's paschal solemnity in this way,
 listening to his word and celebrating his mysteries,
 then we shall have the sure hope

of sharing his triumph over death
and living with him in God.

Then the fire is blessed:

Let us pray.

O God, who through your Son
bestowed upon the faithful the fire of your glory,
sanctify this new fire, we pray,
and grant that, by these paschal celebrations,
we may be so inflamed with heavenly desires,
that with minds made pure
we may attain festivities of unending splendor.
Through Christ our Lord.

The paschal candle is inscribed:

Christ yesterday and today,
the Beginning and the End,
Alpha, and Omega;
all time belongs to him
and all the ages;
to him be glory and power,
through every age and forever. Amen.

By his holy and glorious wounds
may Christ the Lord guard us and protect us. Amen.

As he lights the candle, the priest says:

May the light of Christ rising in glory
dispel the darkness of our hearts and minds.

This is one of the most impressive of the Church's sacramentals. It has great power to compel our attention, evoking the awareness of the Risen and Glorious Christ in all His splendor and power.

Procession with the Paschal Candle

Ancient documents show that this candle was anointed with Holy Chrism in the form of a cross. By the 7th century, the Greek Alpha and Omega and the date of the current year were inscribed on it. In the Middle Ages the grains of incense were inserted into the candle, as symbols of the five glorious wounds of the Risen Christ.

The Paschal candle is the "pillar of fire" leading us into the darkened church, scattering the darkness before it. The flame of the Light of Christ spreads from the Paschal candle to the candles of all present. This a vivid dramatization of the resurrection, the complete victory of Light over darkness, comes to us from Jerusalem.

The pillar of fire in the Exodus guided the children of Israel through the desert on their way to the promised land, and safely through the Red Sea. On this most holy night, we pass through the waters of baptism or commemorate our baptism, by renewing our baptismal promises:

"This is the night, when once you led our forebears, Israel's children, from slavery in Egypt and made them pass dry-shod through the Red Sea. This is the night that with a pillar of fire banished the darkness of sin.." (Exsultet)

When we say “Thanks be to God!” in response to “Light of Christ”, we are thanking God for the resurrection of Christ in which we share, and for all the gifts of our redemption. When all the candles in the church have been lit, we see a powerful symbol of the communication of the Paschal Mystery to the whole world. The whole world is now bathed with the light of the Word Made Flesh.

Exsultet or Easter Proclamation

The candle is enthroned in its place in the sanctuary, and the whole church glows with the light of Christ. Then the Exsultet is sung. From the 5th century on, the same basic text that we have today was in use in the Latin Church. It was long attributed to St. Augustine, and more recently to St. Ambrose, but it seems to have been composed in Gaul.

This noble and extremely rich prayer is a blessing of the candle, that is, an offering and consecration of it. The Church thus dedicates this light to God, sets it apart for Him and makes it holy. This is why the candle is called a “sacrifice” – something offered and dedicated to God.

Readings

In our present rite, the Church has selected 7 Old Testament readings and psalms, with one New Testament reading (Epistle) before the Gospel. We inherit this part of the vigil service from the Roman Vigil. Jerusalem documents from the 4th century, as well as documents from Gaul and Spain in the 7th century, show there were 12 readings, but by the 6th century in Rome, there were only 6. St. Gregory the Great reduced the number to four. The monks of Cluny in the Middle Ages had four, but 12 were restored in the Roman Missal of St Pius V in 1570.

In our time, we have 9 readings in all. The readings recount the wonderful works and promises of God, that are all fulfilled in Christ. When there are baptisms, fewer readings may be used. It is truly a vigil of reading and prayer, as we wait for the return of our Risen Lord.

Blessing of the Easter Water

Since in our monastery we do not celebrate the Sacrament of Baptism on this night, the celebrant blesses the Easter water, using the water in the water channel in the chapel. This is used throughout the Easter season as a reminder of the grace of our baptism.

Renewal of our Baptismal Promises

Pope Pius XII in the one who introduced this in the year 1951. It is the occasion to attest our fidelity to the Risen Christ in an exterior and public act.

Our candles are then lit once again from the light of the Paschal candle, for the renewal of our baptismal promises. The power of this rite is such that we can undergo an interior baptism in the Spirit. The celebrant then moves through the assembly blessing everyone with Easter water.

The rest of the Mass is as usual.

Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!

These reflections are compiled by Sister Catherine Marie, C.P. Her resources are [The Meaning of Holy Week](#) by Reverend William J. O’Shea, 1965 published by The Liturgical Press, [The Catechism of the Catholic Church \(CCC\)](#) and [Ecclesia de Eucharistia \(EE\)](#) by St. John Paul II.