

# HOLY SATURDAY THE EASTER VIGIL



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## Outline of the Liturgy

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### Holy Saturday The Easter Vigil

#### SERVICE OF LIGHT

Blessing of the Fire  
[Preparation of the Candle]  
Lighting of the Candle  
Procession  
Easter Proclamation

#### LITURGY OF THE WORD

Old Testament Readings, Psalm Responses, Prayers  
Gloria  
Prayer  
Epistle  
Alleluia  
Gospel  
Homily

#### LITURGY OF BAPTISM

Presentation of the Candidates  
Litany of the Saints  
Blessing over the Water  
Profession of Faith  
Baptism  
Explanatory Rites

If No Reception of Candidates  
into Full Communion

Renewal of Baptismal Promises

If Reception of Candidates  
into Full Communion

Celebration of Reception

#### CONFIRMATION

#### CONFIRMATION

Renewal of Promises

#### LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST

Dismissal

## Historical Survey

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So central to the liturgical year was the celebration of the Paschal Vigil that St. Gregory of Nazianzus (329–389) spoke of it as the "solemnity of solemnities, far exalted above all others"; Commodian (middle of third century) in Africa called this day the "*dies felicissimus*"; and it was St. Augustine (354–430) in Africa who gave the service its most famous designation, "the mother of all vigils." An inscription (fourth or fifth century) found in a Christian cemetery in central Italy says that a young man died at the "fifth prayer of the night office on Easter night."

A third-century work called the *Teaching of the Apostles* gives us an insight into the content of the observance: "Fast completely on Friday and Saturday, tasting nothing. Gather as one, stay awake, and keep watch throughout the whole night, making supplication, praying, and reading the prophets and the gospel and the psalms with fear and trembling and with diligent supplication until the third hour of the night after Saturday, and then break your fast....Afterwards, offer your sacrifice; then eat, be joyful, rejoice, be happy, because Christ, the pledge of our resurrection, has risen."

The faithful kept vigil "throughout the whole night" since they believed that new life was given to Christ during the night and that the risen Lord would return to this world during the night. Concluding the night watch was the eucharist, the memorial of the Lord's death and resurrection; by receiving communion one passed from fast to feast, namely, to the beginning of the fifty day feast of Pentecost.

Once the peace of Constantine took effect and Christianity was no longer subject to persecution, the number of converts increased and, accordingly, the structure of the baptismal rites, which came to be celebrated during the vigil, began to expand and develop. Eventually a light ceremony (Jesus being the light that drives away the darkness) opened the celebration. And so it was that by the early thirteenth century all the rites we now associate with the vigil celebration were in place.

Service of Light

Liturgy of Word

Celebration of Baptism

Liturgy of Eucharist

As mentioned earlier, the original Paschal Vigil was a night office, beginning after dark and lasting till well after midnight or even till the break of dawn, but by the seventh century the night vigil had for the most part disappeared. The service eventually began about five in the evening, then at noon, then at eleven in the morning, and finally during the early morning hours, attended by few and with such anomalies as the deacon entering the church with the candle and chanting "*Lumen Christi*" as the rays of the morning sun

beamed through stained glass windows into the building. Any semblance of a prolonged night vigil with its symbolism of light conquering darkness had long disappeared.

In 1951, under Pope Pius XII, the Vigil was restored to the evening, and its ceremonies were somewhat altered, both for purposes of the people's participation and for reasons of simplification. This reform led to the rites we celebrate today.

## Documentation

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211. Night prayer for Holy Saturday is said only by those who are not present at the Easter Vigil.

212. The Easter Vigil takes the place of the office of readings. Those not present at the solemn celebration of the Vigil should therefore read at least four of its readings with the chants and prayers. It is desirable that these be the readings from Exodus, Ezekiel, St. Paul, and from the Gospel. The *Te Deum* follows, then the prayer of the day. *General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours*

18....The solemnity of Easter has the same kind of preeminence in the liturgical year that Sunday has in the week.

21. The Easter Vigil, during the holy night when Christ rose from the dead, ranks as the "mother of all vigils." Keeping watch, the Church awaits Christ's resurrection and celebrates it in the sacraments. Accordingly, the entire celebration of this vigil should take place at night, that is, it should either begin after nightfall or end before the dawn of Sunday. *General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar*

28. The evening Mass before Easter may not be started before dusk or certainly not before sunset. This Mass is always the Mass of the Easter Vigil, which by reason of its special significance in the liturgical year and in the whole Christian life must be celebrated with the liturgical rites for this holy night according to the rite for the Easter Vigil....*Instruction "Eucharisticum mysterium"*

43....In the case where a pastor has charge of two or more parishes where a good number of the faithful participate and the celebrations can be carried out with due care and solemnity, he may, for the good of the faithful, hold the celebrations of the Easter Vigil in each parish, observing those things that are to be observed. *Circular Letter "Paschalis sollemnitatis"*

### *Circular Letter "Paschalis sollemnitatis"*

#### VII. Easter Sunday of the Lord's Resurrection

##### A. *Easter Vigil on the holiest night*

77. In accord with the most ancient tradition this night is a night of vigil for the Lord and the vigil that is celebrated during it to commemorate the holy night when the Lord rose is regarded as the "mother of all vigils." For during this night the Church keeps vigil awaiting the Lord's resurrection and celebrating it through the sacraments of Christian initiation.

##### 1. *Meaning of the nocturnal character of the Easter Vigil*

78. "The entire celebration of the Easter Vigil takes place at night: it should not begin before nightfall; it should end before daybreak on Sunday." This rule must be interpreted strictly. Therefore the contrary abuse and practice cropping up here and there

of celebrating the Easter Vigil at the same hour as the unusual anticipated Sunday Masses is condemned.

The reasons advanced for anticipating the Easter Vigil, for example, lack of public safety, are not brought up when it comes to Christmas Eve or gatherings of various kinds.

79. The Passover vigil during which the Hebrews spent the night in expectation of the passing of the Lord to deliver them from the slavery of the Pharaoh has been observed by Jews as a yearly memorial of that event. That Passover was a figure of Christ's future Passover, that is, of the night of true deliverance, when "Christ broke the chains of death and rose triumphant from the grave."

80. From the beginning the Church has celebrated the annual Pasch, the solemnity of solemnities, principally by a night vigil. The resurrection of Christ is the firm basis of our faith and hope; through baptism and confirmation we are plunged into the paschal mystery of Christ, we die with him, are buried and rise with him, and with him we will reign.

This Vigil is also an expectation of the coming of the Lord.

### *2. Structure of the Easter Vigil and importance of its elements and parts*

81. The Easter Vigil is arranged in this way: the first part is the ceremony of light and the Easter proclamation (*Exsultet*); the second part is the liturgy of the word, in which the Church reflects on the wonderful deeds of God for his people since the beginning; the third part is the liturgy of baptism, when new members of the Church receive new birth; the fourth part is the liturgy of the eucharist, when the whole Church is called to the table prepared for it by the Lord as the memorial of his death and resurrection until he comes.

This order is not to be changed by any personal initiative.

### *3. Pastoral Remarks*

93. The liturgy of the Easter Vigil is to be carried out in such a way as to provide the Christian people with the riches of its prayers and rites; authenticity must be respected, the participation of the faithful promoted; there must be servers, readers, and singers for the celebration.

94. It is desirable that provision be made for the gathering of several communities in one church in cases when, because of their proximity or small size, a full, festive celebration is not possible.

It is preferable that particular groups take part in the celebration of the Easter Vigil at which all the faithful, coming together as one, can more deeply experience the feeling of being an ecclesial community.

The faithful who are on vacation and away from their own parish are to be urged to take part in the liturgical celebration of the place where they are staying.

95. In announcements concerning the Easter Vigil, it should not be described as the last service of Holy Saturday. It is better to say that the Vigil is celebrated "in the night of Easter" and as a single act of Easter worship. Pastors are reminded that in catechesis they should carefully instruct the faithful about taking part in the entire Vigil.

96. To improve the celebration of the Easter Vigil it is necessary that pastors themselves acquire an ever-more profound knowledge of the texts and rites, so that they can impart a genuine catechesis (mystagogy) to their people.

1. In accord with ancient tradition, this night is one of vigil for the Lord (Ex 12:42). The Gospel of Luke (12:35ff) is a reminder to the faithful to have their lamps burning ready, to be like men awaiting their master's return so that when he arrives he will find them wide awake and will seat them at his table. *Roman Missal*

2. The night vigil is arranged in four parts:

- a) a brief service of light;
- b) the liturgy of the word, when the Church meditates on all the wonderful things God has done for his people from the beginning;
- c) the liturgy of baptism, when new members of the Church are reborn as the day of resurrection approaches; and
- d) the liturgy of the eucharist, when the whole Church is called to the table which the Lord has prepared for his people through his death and resurrection. *Roman Missal*

### *Roman Missal*

3...In the United States it is never permitted to celebrate the entire Easter Vigil more than once in a given church or to anticipate the Mass of Easter before the vigil; in those places where the local Ordinary permits the anticipation of Sunday Masses on Saturday evening, for pastoral reasons an additional Mass may be celebrated after the Mass of the Easter Vigil. Such a Mass may follow the liturgy of the Mass of the Easter Vigil (nos. 23–36) and other texts of that Mass and should include the renewal of baptismal promises (nos. 46–47).

4. Even if the vigil Mass takes place before midnight, the Easter Mass of the resurrection is celebrated . . .

5. Those who celebrate or concelebrate the Mass at night may celebrate or concelebrate the second Mass of Easter Sunday.

6. The priest and deacon wear white vestments.

Candles should be prepared for all who take part in the vigil.

## Reflection

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The Paschal Vigil is unique among the celebrations of the Church. It is a time to wait, to watch, to look, to listen, to meditate, to spend time with other Christians and not be restrained by the demands of the hour. The observance is not an anticipated Mass of Easter Sunday. St. Augustine indeed addressed the heart of the matter: "Watch, I tell you, and pray. Let us celebrate this vigil internally and externally. Let God speak to us in these readings. Let us speak to him in our prayers. If we hear his words obediently, he to whom we pray will dwell in us" (Sermon 219). It is about the freedom of prayer.

## Suggested Questions for Discussion

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1. In what sense may the Paschal Vigil be called the "turning point" of the triduum?
2. What are the primary symbols of the Easter Vigil?
3. Why is it important that the Vigil start after nightfall and conclude before dawn?
4. How is darkness created?
5. What spaces are needed for celebrating the Vigil?
6. What time constraints, if any, should be considered in planning the Vigil?
7. In communities where there usually are multiple language celebrations, what can be done to accommodate the various language groups and yet have only one Vigil celebration?
8. What can be done so that floral and other decorations do not overwhelm the primary symbols of the celebration?

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