

A Celebration of the Easter Vigil

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Asking the Right Question

In September 1995 our parish liturgy committee began a study and an evaluation of the celebration of the Easter Vigil in our community. The number of people attending the Vigil had been steadily declining for several years; there were increasing calls to push the time of the Vigil further and further ahead into the early hours of Saturday evening. While the Christmas midnight mass continues to be popular in our congregation, a midnight Easter Vigil was not capturing the hearts of people.

As we read and discussed various commentaries and articles, several phrases stood out for their strong language. One, referring to the partial restoration in 1951, noted that this great liturgical experiment ordered by Pius XII has a profound meaning and structure; it is most definitely *no toy to be played with*. As we reflected on the structure and meaning of the Vigil, we became convinced that making it more convenient by shortening it and celebrating it early on Saturday evening was not the answer. It might attract more people, but, as the lesson of history shows, it could lead again to the near disappearance of the Paschal Vigil.

Our response was not to invent something new. We simply took the sacramentary and set about to implement it as completely and as well as we could. If the focus of the celebration is baptismal, then we will baptize. If the core of the Vigil is the liturgy of the word, then we will celebrate the liturgy of the word in its completeness, with special attention to psalmody familiar to the congregation. And so, we set about preparing the Vigil — in September.

As we did this work, one issue continued to be contentious: the time of the celebration. Again, we took our cue from a commentary which stated that on this one night the Church should be *in reality* what we should be *symbolically* all year: we should be found watching through the night, awaiting the return of the Lord. This said to us that the time of the Vigil is not incidental. Rather, it is crucial to the nature of the Vigil. The *time* of the Vigil is in itself a symbol that speaks.

The Answer We Arrived At

In January of 1998, we presented our plans to the parish on the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord at the Sunday eucharist. The major plank in our proposal was that the liturgical celebration would begin with the lighting of a large outdoor bonfire. The fire would be lit at 4:30 AM on Sunday morning.

Throughout the Lenten season, the homilies connected to the scriptural themes of the Vigil. Each Sunday of Lent the assembly was encouraged to look toward the Vigil. We had no idea how this was going to turn out, but, at least, the Vigil became the talk of the town for three months. The reactions ranged from “That’s great!” to “You’re nuts!”

On Saturday of the Triduum, the church was open for quiet prayer (vigil?) from 7 PM onwards. The students of the grades eleven and twelve religion program agreed to vigil with us. For them it was an all-night retreat in the hall (the church basement), but every hour on the hour we went up to the church for a scripture reading and prayer. Parishioners were invited to join us for a few

minutes of quiet prayer, if they could, at any point through the night. (Only five people did: this needs work.).

The high-school students were responsible for the liturgy of light. They lit the fire at 4 AM (a half-hour early!). A wondrous thing happened! People started arriving in groups of two and three—then in groups of five and six, and so on. People living near the church could be seen walking down the hill with small children in hand. The Knights of Columbus had offered to arrange transport for seniors. They began to arrive. The students had lit the fire early because they were in a youthful rush to get started. It proved to be a great idea. The fire was a beacon drawing people. They naturally gathered around it.

Surprising Results

In the darkness of the parking lot, it was difficult to tell the size of the crowd, but as we proceeded into the church we were elated. The church was packed! We had to put out extra chairs—something normally done only at Christmas and on Good Friday. After the liturgy of the word and the liturgy of baptism (one adult and two children of catechetical age), we began the liturgy of the eucharist just as the sun broke over the horizon. (This break with the rubric was due to an inadvertent miscalculation of time on our part.) At 7 AM, as the liturgical celebration ended, we invited everyone downstairs to a hot Easter breakfast (complimentary) hosted by the Knights of Columbus and served by the students of the confirmation class.

The whole experience was awesome. “The Vigil” continued to be the talk of the town for another month. Then spring and summer came and went, and it was September of 1998 and the liturgy committee was meeting again. Should we do it again for Easter of 1999? Was it a fluke? Was it just the novelty of it? Again we returned to the sacramentary and commentaries. We hadn’t done this as a novelty. We had done it to implement what the church asked us to do.

So, in April of 1999 we did it again. This time we had two strikes against us. This was the night that the clocks went ahead one hour—another hour of sleep gone—and, second, this past April 3–4 in Cape Breton we had the heaviest snowfall of the year. Still they came. Again a full church, again a wonderful celebration. In September of 1999, our liturgy committee met again. This year, it is simply assumed that we have adopted this as parish practice.

We started by asking how we could encourage more people to attend the Vigil. We switched our focus and asked more pertinent questions: what is the nature of the Paschal Vigil and how can we best celebrate it? This involved much more than a time-change. It involved hard work and study. It involved co-operation with the religious education teachers and students, the youth group, and the Knights of Columbus. It involved parish preparation months ahead of time. But, somehow, the time-change pushed us to re-examine the nature and the power of this holy night.

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