

A church vigil is a time of prayerful watching and waiting. Our church observes a vigil on the night before our most important feasts. Christmas and Pentecost, for example, have beautiful vigil services. But Easter, our most important feast, has the most glorious vigil service of all. In fact, this night is called the holiest night of the Church year.

Your family is invited to join with other families in your parish to celebrate Easter Vigil 2011, Holy Saturday night, April 23. Because the service is long, you will want to take only children who are old enough to appreciate and understand what is happening. Here's what you can expect to happen. There will be four main parts: the Service of Light, the Liturgy of the Word, the Liturgy of Baptism, and the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

The Service of Light

The Service of Light will begin in the dark outside your church, shortly after sunset. Inside, the church, too, will be dark. The darkness is a symbol of the world before Jesus came, a world ruled by sin and evil where only a faithful few believed and hoped in God's promise of a savior.

On this Holy Saturday night in 2011, we are no longer a faithful few. Millions of Catholics will gather at parishes throughout the world to remember and celebrate Christ's defeat of sin and evil through his life, death, and resurrection. The celebration will begin with the lighting of a bonfire and many, many candles to symbolize the light that Christ's love has brought into the world. Before the vigil begins you will receive an unlighted candle to use in the ritual.



The Blessing of Fire: To begin the Service of Light, the celebrant will light a big bonfire as a symbol of the light Christ brings to the world through his followers. The celebrant will bless the new fire, praying, "Make this new fire holy, and inflame us with new hope. Purify our minds by this Easter celebration and bring us one day to the feast of eternal light."

The Lighting of the Easter Candle: After blessing the fire, the celebrant will decorate the paschal (Easter) candle. With a sharp carving instrument, he will trace a cross in the wax. As he traces the vertical arm of the cross, he will say, "Christ yesterday and today." While tracing the horizontal arm, he will say, "The beginning and the end." Next, he will trace the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, *alpha* and *omega* (symbols for Christ, who is the beginning and end of all good things), saying, "Alpha and omega." Next, he will trace the numbers 2011, the numbers of the current year, saying, "All time belongs to him and all the ages, to him be glory and power through every age forever. Amen." Finally, he will insert five grains of incense into the candle, a symbol of the five wounds of the crucified Jesus, saying, "By his holy and glorious wounds may Christ our Lord guard us and keep us. Amen."

The celebrant will then light the decorated paschal candle from the new fire praying, "May the light of Christ, rising in glory, dispel the darkness of our minds and hearts."



If your parish has a deacon, the celebrant will turn the Easter candle over to him. Otherwise the celebrant will perform this part of the ritual himself. The celebrant/deacon will lift the Easter candle high and sing, “Christ our light!” and the people will answer, “Thanks be to God.” Next, the people, led by the celebrant/deacon and other ministers, will process toward the darkened church. The celebrant/deacon will stop in the doorway of the church, turn to the people and lift the Easter candle for the second time, singing, “Christ our light.” And the people will again answer, “Thanks be to God.” At this point, the celebrant/deacon will hold the Easter candle out for the people to light their individual candles in its flame. The people will then take their places in the pews. The celebrant/deacon will next enter the sanctuary, turn to the people for the third time, raise the paschal candle, and sing out, “Christ our light.” And for the third time the people will respond, “Thanks be to God.” Now all the lights will be turned on in the church, flooding it completely with light, and the celebrant/deacon will place the Easter candle in its stand.

The Liturgy of Light will close with the celebrant/deacon singing our beautiful Easter song called the *Exsultet* (a song of exultation).

Here are some of the joyful words that you will hear. You might want to light candles at your Easter dinner on Sunday and pray the words of the *Exsultet* together.

*Rejoice, heavenly power! Sing, choirs of angels!
Exult, all creation around God's throne!
Jesus Christ, our King, is risen!
Sound the trumpet of salvation!*

Liturgy of the Word

After the Easter Song, the people will blow out their candles and lay them aside. The priest then will invite the people to listen to God speaking to them through the sacred words of Scripture. There will be readings from both the Old Testament and the New Testament: stories of the creation and how God saved his people through Noah, Abraham, Moses, how finally, in the fullness of time, through God's own Son, Jesus Christ. The reading from the Book of Exodus (14:15-15:1) is especially important because it tells how God saved our ancestors in faith, the Israelites, from slavery in Egypt by leading them safely through the waters of the Red Sea. This story has been chosen because it reminds us of our own saving waters in Baptism. By passing through the waters of Baptism, we are saved from slavery to sin. In Jesus Christ we die to sin so that we may rise with him to new and everlasting life.



This truth will be underlined by a reading from St. Paul's letter to the Romans (6:3-11). St. Paul writes, “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (6:11).

After the Epistle will come the Gospel account of the first Easter. The Gospel this year will be from St. Matthew (28:1-10), the story of Mary Magdalene and another follower of Jesus named

Mary at the tomb of Jesus on the first Easter Sunday. During the last part of the Liturgy of the Word, you will hear the church bells ring and some joyful words you have not heard since the beginning of Lent: Gloria and Alleluia.



The Liturgy of Baptism

This part of the vigil will begin with the celebrant and other church ministers processing to the baptismal font to bless the water to be used for baptisms throughout the year. The deacon or other church minister carrying the Easter candle will lead, followed by those who are to be baptized and their godparents, and finally the celebrant and other church ministers.

During the blessing of the baptismal water, the priest will lower the Easter candle into the water and say or sing, “We ask you, Father, with your Son to send the Holy Spirit upon the waters of this font. May all who are buried with Christ in the death of baptism rise also with him to newness of life. We ask this through Christ our Lord.” And the people will answer, “Amen.” As the priest lifts the candle out of the water, the people will sing, “Springs of water, bless the Lord. Give him glory and praise forever.” The priest will sprinkle some of the newly blessed water on the people. And the candidates for Baptism will be baptized in the waters of the font. After their Baptism and Confirmation, they will take their rightful place among the faithful.

The Liturgy of the Eucharist

The Liturgy of the Eucharist will proceed in the usual way. The newly baptized will join God’s family at the Lord’s table for the first time. Be sure to welcome and congratulate these new brothers and sisters in Christ on this holiest night of the year.

As this first Mass of Easter ends, you will want to give special thanks to Jesus, who has given himself to you totally in the Eucharist, Body and Blood, so that he may live in you and raise you up again someday to live with him forever. As you head for home on this holiest night of the year, think about this: the first Easter more than 2,000 years ago has made all Christ’s glory now and his glory to come possible. Sing an Easter hymn along the way, something like “Jesus Christ Is Risen Today.”

