

The Great Vigil *The first celebration of Easter*

The Great Vigil of Easter (Easter/Paschal Vigil) is the ancient and original heart of Holy Week. This night of vigil celebrating both the Passion and Resurrection of Christ can be traced back to the second century of the Christian era. It began in the dark and ended at sunrise.

Soon the Eucharist was added to the vigil followed by Baptism, the sacrament of Christian initiation. In the Apostolic Tradition (Hippolytus c. 170-236) the detailed description of Baptism is more than likely part of the Vigil. Soon the Great Vigil became recognized as “the great Sacramental night” of the Church year.

St. Augustine (354-430) noted this vigil in his writings. Later, the Easter Vigil was extended to include the initiation of Holy Eucharist and the Lord's passion and death and subsequently grew into the Sacred Triduum, the three concluding days of Holy Week and added to the existing Easter Vigil the celebration of the Last Supper on Maundy (Holy) Thursday and the Lord's death on Good Friday. The Great (Easter) Vigil became recognized as the first and primary celebration of the Resurrection of the Lord. The Vigil began sometime after dark and concluded with baptisms at sunrise.

The Great Vigil has gone through various modifications throughout the centuries but the basic pattern has remained. As the sky darkens the congregation assembles outside, the church is darkened and a new fire is lit. The celebrant blesses the new fire and from it the Paschal Candle is lit. The Paschal Candle (the Christ light) is used to light candles held by the congregation and all process into the darkened church. Lighted only by candle light a deacon or priest chants the Exultet, an ancient hymn extolling Christ as the light of the world. Then scripture readings telling the story of salvation are read along with hymns and psalms. Baptism or Renewal of Baptism Vows follows. Then the first celebration of Easter begins. The candles at the altar are lit and the lights are turned up all the way. Bells are rung, alleluias are said and sung as we commemorate the first Easter with Holy Eucharist.

If you have not experienced the Great Vigil I encourage you to do so. *Father Al*