

NOTES ON THE LITURGY

Office of Divine Worship - Archdiocese of Newark

Questions on the Easter Vigil

How many Easter Vigil celebrations may a parish have?

Each parish church is to have only one celebration of the Easter Vigil. This directive is liturgical law and can be found in the *Sacramentary* and in the *Circular Letter Concerning the Preparation and Celebration of the Paschal Feasts*, 94: “The celebration of the Easter Vigil for special groups is not to be encouraged, since above all in this vigil the faithful should come together as one and should experience a sense of ecclesial community.”

For many people, it comes as a surprise that a parish would even think of having more than one Vigil celebration, and it should. After all, this liturgy is not only awesome and inspiring but also lengthy and complex. Still, some parishes are faced with unique pastoral situations such as Masses in different languages or multiple worship sites in a particular parish. Some of these issues will be looked at in more detail below, but to answer this question, it is enough to state that there is to be one and only one Easter Vigil celebration in each parish.

Why can there be only one Vigil?

The purpose of celebrating the liturgies of the Church is always to give witness to the faith as a community, not as an individual or private group. Liturgical celebrations are public acts, open to all members of the Church. The Easter Vigil, being the liturgy *par excellence*, is above all meant to gather the entire people of a parish community to celebrate the Paschal Mystery in its fullness. Masses are not permitted on Holy Saturday; priests are not permitted to celebrate private Masses. In order to participate in the Eucharist on Holy Saturday, one must attend the Easter Vigil.

The power of the gathered assembly in prayer fuels the life of the Church. There is even a sense of the universal People of God gathered together for this special night in the texts for the Vigil found in the *Sacramentary* itself:

“Dear friends in Christ, on this most holy night, when our Lord Jesus Christ passed from death to new life, the Church invites its sons and daughters throughout the world to come together in vigil and prayer.” (p 171)

Ideally, every community ought to gather in its entirety each Sunday for Mass, but due to the large size of many parishes and a certain pastoral sensitivity to the schedules of people, multiple Sunday Masses are offered. This is not to be the case for the Easter Vigil when, on these very special holy days, we return to our roots as a people of faith gathered together in one assembly.

It would obviously be inauthentic to repeat the rites particular to the Easter Vigil. It makes no liturgical sense to bless a fire and light a candle for use throughout the year and then extinguish it afterwards and start over again with the same candle as if the first blessing did not take. Consider the illogic of blessing gallons of water for Easter and then pretending like it was not done and repeating the process in another Vigil a few hours later. The rites particular to the Easter Vigil are meant to be binding on the entire community *whether or not every member is present*.

Is the Vigil a Saturday night Mass for Easter Sunday?

The Easter Vigil is never to be compared to a Saturday evening anticipated Mass, but rather, it is in itself its own unique liturgy. The Vigil is *not* an anticipated Mass for Easter Sunday; however, attendance at the Easter Vigil *does* fulfill the Easter Sunday obligation.

“The entire celebration of the Easter Vigil takes place at night. It should not begin before nightfall; it should end before daybreak on Sunday.” (*Sacramentary*, p 170) This rule is to be taken according to its strictest sense. Reprehensible are those abuses and practices which have crept in many places in violation of this ruling, whereby the Easter Vigil is celebrated at the time of day that it is customary to celebrate anticipated Sunday Masses.” (*Circular Letter Concerning the Preparation and Celebration of the Paschal Feasts*, 78).

No Masses whatsoever are to be celebrated on Holy Saturday before the Easter Vigil, and the Easter Vigil may never be celebrated until well after sunset on Holy Saturday. In the northeastern USA, this would mean after 8 PM and possibly as late as 8:30 PM.

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Can there be an Easter Mass on Saturday night after the Easter Vigil has concluded?

Yes. "In the United States, although 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 the 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 word of the Easter Vigil...and should include the renewal of baptismal promises." (*Sacramentary*, p 170).

Once the Easter Vigil has been completed, Masses of Easter may be celebrated, even if it is still Saturday evening or very early Sunday morning. However, this should in no way affect the starting time of the Easter Vigil, which is to be at least 30 minutes after sunset.

It should be clear that the rites particular to the Easter Vigil are not to be repeated at any other Easter Mass. This means that at any Mass following the Vigil, there would be no service of light, no proclamation of the exsultet, no full initiation of the Elect, no blessing of Easter water. The paschal candle is lighted before the Mass starts and would remain in its place near the ambo for the entire liturgy.¹ It may be incensed at the beginning of Mass.

As stated in the rubric above, an extended liturgy of the word as at the Vigil would be permissible at an Easter Mass following the Vigil on Saturday evening. Required at all Easter Masses by the *Sacramentary* (p 209) is the renewal of baptismal promises and sprinkling rite.

How long should the Easter Vigil last?

The Easter Vigil should be as long as it takes to meaningfully and fully celebrate the rites of this special night. Given the additional rites of the Vigil and the likely presence of the Elect for full initiation, it should easily take a minimum of two hours to celebrate. This should not be looked upon as a burden.

A successful Easter Vigil is not determined by how short it is, but by how short it feels. It is necessary to create a sense of flow in any liturgy, but especially one as lengthy as the Easter Vigil. This ordinarily requires some rehearsal on the part of the liturgical ministers, including the presider and the RCIA sponsors (but not the Elect themselves who should experience it unrehearsed). When ministers know what they are doing; when items are in the right place before the Vigil begins; when musicians are aware of proper cues, a sense of flow ensues and awareness of earthly time (*kronos*) will fade as the assembly enters God's time (*kairos*).

What are some considerations for the Easter Vigil in multi-lingual parishes?

Parishes which ordinarily have Masses in multiple languages should still have only one celebration of the Easter Vigil. The parish can make use of multiple languages during the liturgy, but there may be only one Vigil. Considering the many readings, psalms, prayers and musical needs of this liturgy, there are ample opportunities to use more than one language.

As stated above, Easter Masses may be celebrated any time after the Easter Vigil is completed. This would include a Mass after the Vigil in a language other than that used at the Vigil itself. However, as also stated above, none of the rites particular to the Easter Vigil may be repeated, and full initiation of the Elect is only to be celebrated at the Easter Vigil.



What are some considerations for the Easter Vigil if a parish has more than one worship site?

In these times of closings and mergers, a parish may have more than one worship site. An individual parish with more than one church building needs to take this into consideration when planning the Easter Triduum because even in this situation, ideally only one Vigil may occur.

As stated in the *Circular Letter Concerning the Preparation and Celebration of the Paschal Feasts*: "It would be desirable if on occasion provision were made for several communities to assemble in one church wherever their proximity one to another or small numbers mean that a full and festive celebration could not otherwise take place." (94)

"It is fitting that small religious communities, both clerical and lay, and other lay groups should participate in the celebration of the Easter Triduum in neighboring principal churches. Similarly, where the number of participants and ministers is so small that the celebrations of the Easter Triduum cannot be carried out with the requisite solemnity, such groups of the faithful should assemble in a larger church. Also, where there are small parishes with only one priest it is recommended that such parishes should assemble, as far as possible, in a principal church and there participate in the celebrations." (43)

This statement indicates that parishes which are merged should come together as a single entity to celebrate this holy night.²

Note: In a parish with multiple worship sites, no Easter Masses may take place at any of the sites until that parish's Easter Vigil is completed.

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May more than one paschal candle be blessed at an Easter Vigil celebration?

No. “The paschal candle should be prepared, which for effective symbolism must be made of wax, never be artificial, be renewed each year, *be only one in number*, and be of sufficiently large size so that it may evoke the truth that Christ is the light of the world.” (*Circular Letter Concerning the Preparation and Celebration of the Paschal Feasts*, 82)

The Church does not envision multiple paschal candles at the Easter Vigil. The multiplication of symbols would have a negative effect on the Vigil, causing confusion and even diffusing the symbolic power of the paschal candle itself.

Consider the sign value of the paschal candle. It represents Christ, the light of the world, as it leads the assembly into the darkened church. It reminds the people of the pillar of light leading the Israelites out of Egypt. The power of a single light in the darkness leading God’s people is lost when there are multiple paschal candles. The practice of using multiple paschal candles for any reason is incongruent with the Church’s liturgical practices.

Certainly a worship space in which baptisms and funerals take place must have a paschal candle, and it should be renewed each year. However, if there is no Easter Vigil at the site of a particular worship space, the candle should be replaced for the first liturgy of Easter Sunday and needs only to be lit before Mass begins, and it may be incensed during the opening rites.

Note: In a parish with multiple worship sites, no Easter Masses may take place at any of the sites until that parish’s Easter Vigil is completed.

Do all the readings of the Easter Vigil need to be read?

“The restored order for the vigil has seven readings from the Old Testament, chosen from the Law and the Prophets, which are everywhere in use according to the most ancient tradition of East and West, and two readings from the New Testament, namely from the Apostle and from the Gospel. Thus the church, ‘beginning with Moses and all the prophets’ explains Christ’s paschal mystery. Consequently, wherever this is possible all the readings should be read in order that the character of the Easter Vigil, which demands that it be somewhat prolonged, be respected at all costs.

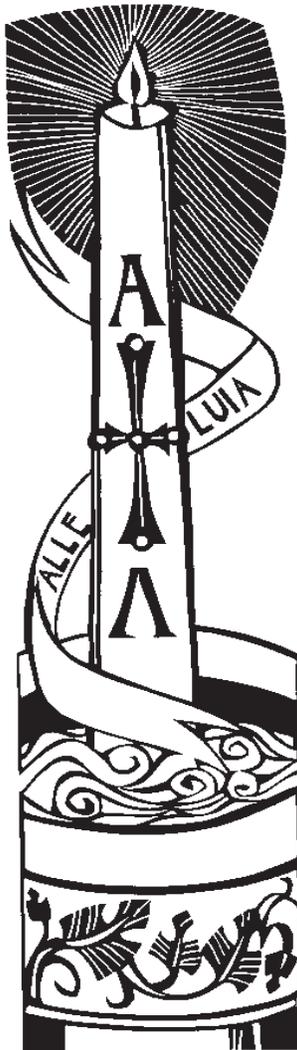
“Where, however, pastoral conditions require that the number of readings be reduced, there should be at least three readings from the Old Testament, taken from the Law and the Prophets, and the reading from Exodus 14 with its canticle must never be omitted.” (*Circular Letter Concerning the Preparation and Celebration of the Paschal Feasts*, 85)

Only in the most exceptional of cases should one eliminate a significant number of readings. A military setting, for example, might be a case where the readings would need to be significantly reduced, but certainly not a parish setting. Recall that the Easter Vigil is not an anticipated Mass for Easter Sunday, but rather it is a true vigil. Ancient vigils included lengthy readings from the scriptures.

The setting of the readings must follow the liturgy of the Church as well, meaning that the reading is to be proclaimed, followed by the appropriate psalm (or a significant period of

silence) and the appropriate collect is prayed by the presider.

Settings of the readings which do not follow this format or the official readings and texts of the *Lectionary for Mass* and the *Sacramentary* should not be used. Further, electronic media such as videos, slideshows or dramatic presentations should never replace the proclamation of the Scriptures at the Vigil (or at any other liturgy of the Church).



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Do real wax candles have to be used at the Easter Vigil?

Yes. Electric candles, flashlights and other such accoutrements should never be used to replace the wax paschal candle or tapers given to the members of the assembly. Inauthentic symbols compromise the liturgy.

Is the litany of the saints sung at the Easter Vigil even when there is no one to be baptized?

Two questions need to be asked when deciding the answer to this question:

1. Does the worship site have a canonical rite to a font?³
2. Will baptism take place at the Vigil?

If the answer to either or both of these questions is “yes,” then the litany is sung.

If the worship site has no rite to a font, that is, it is a chapel where baptisms do not take place, and if no one is to be baptized at the Vigil, the litany is not sung. (However, even where there is no font, water is always blessed at the Vigil for the renewal of baptismal promises and sprinkling rite).

Can a baptized Catholic be confirmed at the Easter Vigil?

No. In the Archdiocese of Newark, the required delegation is not given to confirm baptized Catholics at the Easter Vigil.

Upon written request, delegation is given only to pastors to confirm adult baptized Catholics (18 years or older) on any of the Sundays of Easter, *including Easter Sunday itself and Pentecost.*

Baptized Catholics under the age of 18 must be confirmed by a bishop.

Adult non-Catholics who are validly baptized may be brought into full communion and confirmed at the Easter Vigil, but this is not a preferred practice. Baptism is intrinsic to the Easter Vigil,⁴ even though the infant would not be fully initiated, than to receive a baptized non-Catholic into full communion with the Church.

Baptized non-Catholics may be received into full communion and confirmed on one of the Sundays of Easter (or even a Sunday of Ordinary Time). Any priest may receive and confirm a baptized non-Catholic; no delegation is required.



Endnotes

1. The blessed fire of the Vigil could be maintained for the 50 days of Easter by using the flame from the paschal candle at the Vigil to light the tabernacle lamp and taking the flame from there to light the paschal candle at all Masses and liturgical services during the 50 days of Easter.

2. A possible pastoral approach could be to alternate the location used for the Vigil between the worship sites from year to year. Also, all three of the Triduum liturgies do not have to take place in the same location, so, for example, the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper and/or the Celebration of the Lord's Passion could take place at one worship site in the parish and the Easter Vigil at another. Consideration should also be given to the celebration of the Easter sacraments; does one worship site have a font that is more suitable for baptizing adults?

3. In other words, is the worship site a place where baptisms ordinarily take place, or is it a chapel in a hospital or other place where baptisms are not ordinarily celebrated.

4. “The third part of the vigil is the baptismal liturgy. Christ's passover and ours is now celebrated. This is given full expression in those churches which have a baptismal font and more so when the Christian initiation of adults is held or at least the baptism of infants.” (*Circular Letter Concerning the Preparation and Celebration of the Paschal Feasts*, 88).
