

CELEBRATING THE EASTER VIGIL

A Preliminary Remark:

Liturgy is made up of many elements, including community, Word, action, environment, movement, gestures, postures, processions, senses (smell, touch, hearing, sight...) symbols, ministries, music... Think of all these elements when making your preparations.

The Easter Vigil – a Journey of Four Stages:

The Easter Vigil is made up of four stages:

*The Service of Light;
The Liturgy of the Word;
The Liturgy of Baptism and
The Liturgy of the Eucharist.*

In preparing this night's liturgy the following questions and ideas might be helpful.

The Service of Light

As an introductory rite, the service of light gathers and readies us as one community to hear the Word of God. It begins by the Easter fire and concludes with the singing of the Exsultet.



- ◆ *At what time will the Service of Light begin?* It is presumed that the vigil will take place in darkness. The met. office can provide you with the time of sunset and you can plan accordingly. Remember that this is the first celebration of Easter Sunday and should not be anticipated by any other parish mass!

- ◆ *Where will the Easter fire be located?* Ideally it should be located outside so that priests, ministers and at least some of the community can gather around it. If some of the assembly remain in the church for this part of the liturgy, explore ways how they might hear what is taking place, taking into account the sound system in your particular location. (Given the Irish climate, it is always wise to have a plan B – perhaps a contained fire at the back of the Church. But have the desired intention to opt for an outside fire.)

- ◆ *Where will the Easter candle be brought to at the end of the opening procession?* The Easter candle can be left either by the baptistry or in close proximity to the ambo. If we choose to place the candle by the ambo we are giving ourselves a visible reminder that the readings we proclaim this night, and in all our liturgies, make sense to us through the eyes of Easter Faith. The candle can be kept in place by the ambo until the end of the Easter season.

- ◆ *Who will we need for this stage of the liturgy?* The local boy scouts or **youth group** could be enlisted to build the fire outside. **Ushers** will be needed to guide people when the church is in darkness and to help guide the procession into the church. Ushers might also ensure that everyone present has a candle that will be lit from the Easter candle and a worship aid (leaflet). A **cantor** or cantors will be needed to proclaim in song the Exsultet, if a deacon is not doing so. A group might be invited to prepare the space in the Church where the Easter candle is to be left, i.e. a garland of flowers might be in place at the base of the candle stand. Altar servers of course will be needed at this part of the vigil, as throughout.

- ◆ *When should the candles held by the people be extinguished?* From a practical point of view it may make sense to extinguish these candles after the singing of the Exsultet. Rather than give a long instruction, people can be encouraged to extinguish their candles through the example of those in the sanctuary area. If the presider and other ministers simply, and with some style

and grace(!), blow out their candles the people will follow in their action.

- ◆ *What music will be used at this stage?* After the lighting of the Easter candle there follows **3 sung acclamations** that are staggered during the procession from the fire to the sanctuary area. These acclamations are found in the Sacramentary. There are a number of sung versions of the **Exsultet** outside of the one provided in the Sacramentary. Some of these are very assembly friendly and are worth exploring.
- ◆ *Choreography:* In preparing this stage of the liturgy think out how the actions of processions, lighting candles etc. will be choreographed.
- ◆ *Incense:* For the opening procession have a thurible ready to be lit from the Easter Fire. Remember that as the Exsultet is sung the Easter candle is incensed. What kind of incense does the parish use? – is it hypo-allergenic ? What does it conjure up on our sense of smell?
- ◆ Decide ahead of time whether you are going to do the preparatory rites for the candle, as these are optional.
- ◆ *The Easter Candle itself:* Perhaps this would be an appropriate year to evaluate the quality of the Easter candle used in the parish. Is it of good crafting and quality? If not, is this the year to explore an alternative make of candle that is worthy of its role as the Easter candle?

The Liturgy of the Word

The lighting of the Easter candle and the hymn of praise sung in the Exsultet, brings us to a point where we are ready to hear our story. It is the telling of our story that is at the heart of the vigil. In the light of Easter faith, in the light of the Easter candle we allow ourselves a time of waiting and listening. In the stories of creation, liberation and rebirth we hear not “history” but “our story”.



- ◆ *How many readings will be proclaimed on the night?* In the Roman liturgy we are provided with nine readings – seven from the Old Testament and two from the New Testament (the Epistle and the Gospel). For pastoral reasons the number of Old Testament readings can be reduced to as little as two, with Exodus 14 never being omitted. However, given that the Word of God is at the heart of our vigiling, we should aim to give people a real experience of waiting and listening.
- ◆ *Choreography:* Again when preparing this liturgy of the Word think of its choreography. It is possible to thread a liturgy of the Word together that consists of the different components of word, action, movement, music, song and silence. When doing so we should think of the pace and movement of the Word so as not to overburden any one reading with all the elements of creativity to the detriment of the proclamation of another reading.
- ◆ *Who will we need to minister during this part of the liturgy?* Given the centrality of this celebration in our Church year, this is not an occasion to have one lector proclaim all the readings! (Ideally, of course, this should never be the case!) Tonight’s liturgy of the Word should reflect a sense of the importance of the Word of God in our lives by its vibrancy and the obvious care and effort that have gone into its preparation. We can be creative in how we communicate the Word of God through the use of **musicians**, our best **lectors**, ministers of **movement/gesture** and the gift of silence.

- ◆ *The Gloria:* With the singing of the Gloria we welcome back the church bells that have fallen silent since the Gloria of the Holy Thursday evening liturgy. As well as ringing its church bells during this hymn, a parish might decide to invite parishioners to bring their own small bells to be rung during the refrain of the Gloria. This is an element of the liturgy that can be built upon in years to come so that families will bring them on Holy Thursday, Holy Saturday and for Christmas day. As a start this year, a parish might decide to have the altar servers or some youth of the parish hold hand-held bells and ring them.

- ◆ *Environment:* The Gloria marks the transition from the Old Testament to the New Testament in the liturgy of the Word. It does so through the ringing of the Church bells but also through the invitation to light the altar candles and the practice of decorating the altar with flowers. Some parishes have chosen to invite children to place flowers around the sanctuary area at this time. In practice what this means is having pots of Spring flowers i.e. lily's, chrysanthemums, tulips ...at the back of the Church. Adults need to be in place both at the back and in the front of the Church to direct the children in the placing of the plants at this time. Some parishes have an Easter garden which could be added to/completed during the singing of the Gloria.

- ◆ *The Alleluia:* It could be fair to say that it is not easy to fully appreciate the return of the Alleluia when it is only separated from the Gloria by an opening prayer and a reading. Without doubt the use of a real gospel procession helps to build this appreciation. If a book of the Gospels is used it could be carried aloft through the body of people, with incense and the accompanying use of Psalm 117, with an alleluia refrain. Putting the church lights on full might also contribute to a sense of the highpoint of the Gospel proclamation. In the Alleluia we should sense – seeing, hearing and smelling - the joy, colour, life and light of the Easter story.

- ◆ *The Homily:* The presider might chose to offer a personal profession of Easter faith or invite members of the parish to reflect on their Easter faith and share it with the assembled.
- ◆ *Music:* There are a variety of options for music in this part of the Easter vigil. The priorities for music are the Alleluia and the Gloria. The liturgy of the Word does of course include the use of psalms. Some possibilities include using the set psalm for each reading; using the same psalm refrain throughout with a different verse or verses after each reading; using reflective, instrumental music in place of one of the psalms...

The Liturgy of Baptism

In the light of the Easter candle we have shared our story until we triumphantly and joyfully proclaimed the emptiness of the tomb and the truth of the resurrection. Because we have done this we can now go forward and do what we have really come to do – to baptize and share in the Eucharist.



- ◆ *The Font:* It is essential that the font be seen by all present. If this is not the case a large vessel of water may be placed in the sanctuary. Easter lily's can be placed around the font, together with the holy oils, white garment(s) and candles.
- ◆ *The Litany of the saints:* The litany of the saints accompanies the procession to the font. Names of local or patronal saints can be added to the litany as appropriate. The procession consists of the Easter candle, candidates for baptism together with their Godparents. (If children, rather than adults, are to be baptised their parents also accompany them).The people stand during this litany – a sign of their support and solidarity with those about to become members of the community through baptism.
- ◆ *Blessing of the water:* This beautiful prayer should be proclaimed solemnly with care. The Easter candle should be immersed in the water at the appropriate stage of the prayer. Suitable

instrumental music might be played during the proclamation of this blessing prayer.

- ◆ *Lighting of people's candles:* The people's candles are lit for the renewal of their baptismal promises, which is done **after** the baptism and its explanatory rites. The light from the Easter candle is passed to the assembly once the newly baptized have received their lit candle, after the chrismation and the giving of the white garment. (If an adult is being fully initiated at the vigil, the people's renewal of baptismal promises takes place after the adult's confirmation). A degree of patience is needed here – to wait until all the people have their candles lit before moving into the renewal of promises. This can be accelerated by having ushers primed to bring candles lit from the Easter candle to different corners of the church.

- ◆ *Welcome:* Hopefully the newly baptised and their families will sense our welcome of them into our community. A warm applause at the end of the baptism before the people's renewal of baptismal promises might be one way of communicating this welcome.

- ◆ *Sprinkling Rite:* Of all the sprinkling rites of the year this is the one we need to really know how to celebrate! We are professing our faith in the joy of resurrection which we share through the waters of baptism. How are we going to enable people to connect with this living water? If the presider is to sprinkle the people, what path around the Church will he take? How will he reach as many people as possible with the water? Will people be able to see and feel this living water sailing through the air? Some parishes, in light of the size of their font and the design of their church, actually invite the people "to come to the water". To the accompaniment of song, the people come to the baptism font and generously bless themselves with this holy water.

- ◆ *The General Intercessions:* On this night the newly baptised take part in these prayers for the first time. Even if we have not baptised in our own church, we remember now the thousands

of people throughout the world who have joined our community tonight.

◆ *Sample introduction and conclusion to the General intercessions:*

(Introduction) Dear friends in Christ, on this Easter night the whole world resounds in joy with the good news of resurrection. Filled with renewed strength and courage, we turn to our God in prayer – for our needs and the needs of all the world.

(Conclusion) Creator God, in this time you renew us with the sacraments of your love. Fill us with the power flowing from Christ's resurrection, that we may bring the meaning of the resurrection to our live and the lives of all we meet.

◆ *Music:* Sung music should accompany the procession to the font (the litany of the saints) and the sprinkling rite. A sung response to the general intercessions can underscore the festivity of this night. A joyful alleluia could also be sung after baptism has taken place.

Liturgy of the Eucharist:

It is through the celebration of the Eucharist that the Church continues to celebrate the resurrection of the Lord. Therefore although the rite remains unchanged in relation to the Sunday celebration, we should avoid the temptation to rush this element of the night.



◆ *Who prepares the altar?* If baptism has taken place it is fitting that the newly baptised – or their parents in the case of children – bring the bread and wine to the table of God. Other members of the community can be invited to dress the altar with a large white cloth, corporal and flowers to add to the festivity of this night. It might make more sense to light the candles around the altar at this point rather than at the Gloria.

- ◆ *Gifts of Bread and Wine:* This might be a perfect opportunity to reflect on what bread we use for our liturgies in our community. Does it look and taste like bread, as is called for? Might we think about using larger, more substantial bread like that produced by the Glencairn community? We might also pause to reflect on the vessels we use. Are our chalices and ciboria of good quality and well-crafted?
- ◆ *Take and Eat, Take and Drink:* Tonight we might also seek to answer the call of Jesus to take and eat, take and drink. Could we invite people to share in the cup this night? If so, what practical things do we need to do in order to prepare for this? (*In making this decision the group preparing this liturgy will need to take into account the current available recommendations for Churches from the HSC in regard to the swine flu pandemic.*)
- ◆ *Eucharistic prayer:* Ahead of this year's celebration of the Easter vigil we might reflect on our posture as a community during this prayer. Are we consistent, clear and unified on when and why we kneel/sit/stand? To highlight the centrality of this prayer, if the presider is gifted with a musical voice would it be possible to use one of the sung settings of this prayer?
- ◆ *Music:* The acclamations of the Eucharistic prayer should share a common setting to express their unity. Is there a setting of the Lord's prayer that could be sung as a community? The O'Riada and Estelle White settings are very familiar to people. The song accompanying the communion procession should invite the people to participate while processing. Therefore it is helpful to use a hymn with an easily remembered refrain. Examples include To be your Bread – David Haas; Eat this Bread – Jacques Berthier; Table of Plenty – Dan Schutte; I Will be the Vine – Liam Lawton; I am the Bread of Life – Suzanne Toolan; For the closing song it is hard to beat "Jesus Christ is Risen Today" while there are certainly others from which to choose – including All Creatures of Our God and King.

- ◆ *Sending forth:* At the end of this night parishes might arrange to have a cup of tea for people, if there is a parish hall available to them. If this is possible why not bless an Easter cake after communion that will be shared with those who stay for the cuppa. Alternatively parents might bring Easter eggs for their children which could be blessed before the final dismissal. This after vigil social is a good way to continue the welcome of new members to the community.
- ◆ Don't forget to sing the double alleluia of the dismissal which continues throughout the Easter season.
- ◆ Finally, don't worry if you feel exhausted at the end of this liturgy – you will be in a good position to truly appreciate the joy and renewal of resurrection!

