**Easter Vigil Guide**

**What is the Easter Vigil?**
The Pascal Triduum culminates with the celebration of the Easter Vigil, which is considered the “greatest and most noble of all solemnities” (*Missale Romanum*).

Four elements make up the Easter Vigil: the Liturgy of Light, the Liturgy of the Word, the Liturgy of Baptism, and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. “On this holy night, the Church keeps watch, celebrating the resurrection of Christ in the sacraments and awaiting his return in glory. It is the turning point of the Triduum, the Passover of the new covenant, which marks Christ’s passage from death to life.” (USCCB.org)

**What happens at the Easter Vigil?**
The Easter Vigil begins outside where the faithful gather around a “blazing fire.” This fire is “is to be prepared so that the people may gather around it and experience the flames dispelling the darkness and lighting up the night. Thus do the beauty of the fire, its warmth and its light, draw the liturgical assembly together” (USCCB.org). Once the people have gathered around the fire, the priest and minister process to it and the priest blesses the fire.

Next the Pascal Candle is blessed. The Pascal Candle is a large beeswax candle that symbolizes the light of Christ. It will be lit in the sanctuary during the Easter season, at baptisms, and at funerals throughout the year. To bless the candle the priest first cuts a cross into the wax with a stylus. Then he marks the Greek letter Alpha, Α, above the cross with an Omega, Ω, below it. These first and last letters of the Greek alphabet serve as a reminder that Christ is the beginning and the end of all things. Finally, the priest cuts the numerals of the current year between the arms of the cross.

As the priest cuts these symbols he prays: “Christ yesterday and today…” (vertical arm of the cross); “…the beginning and the end…” (horizontal arm); “…Alpha…” (Α, above cross); “…and Omega…” (Ω, below); “…all time belongs to Him…” (1st numeral, upper left corner of the cross); “…and all the ages…” (2nd, upper right); “to Him be glory and power…” (3rd, lower left); “…through ever age for ever. Amen” (4th, lower right).

Next the priest will insert five grains of incense, representing Christ’s five wounds, into the candle in the form of a cross, praying as he does, “By His holy/ and glorious wounds/ may Christ our Lord/ guard us/ and keep us.” Finally, he will light the candle from the fire praying, “May the light of Christ, rising in glory dispel the darkness of our hearts and minds.”

After the Pascal Candle is blessed and lit the procession into the church begins. The usual order for the procession is the thurifer (incense bearer), the deacon with the lighted Pascal Candle, the priest, and then the people holding unlit candles. At three points during this procession there will be a pause during which the deacon proclaims in song, “Christ our Light” and the people respond, “Thanks be to God.” This first takes place at the door of the Church, after which the priest lights his candle. The second is in the middle of the church, after which the assembly light their candles. The third is before the altar facing the people. The Pascal Candle is then placed in prominent place in the church, incensed, and the lights of the church, except for the altar candles, are lit.

Following the procession, the Exsultet or the Easter Proclamation is sung, generally by a deacon. The *Exsultet* is a great and ancient hymn. It powerfully proclaims God’s saving work throughout history and its culmination in Christ’s defeat of sin and death and the victory of His Resurrection. The *Exsultet* emphasizes in words and music what the growing presence of light in the liturgy has thus far communicated, that the light of Christ has banished all darkness.
What happens at the Easter Vigil? (continued)
At this point, the service moves into the Liturgy of the Word. In the Easter Vigil the Liturgy of the Word is dramatically expanded with nine readings total, eight readings from the Old Testament, an epistle reading from the New Testament, and a Gospel reading. Each non-Gospel reading is followed by a sung responsorial psalm and a prayer led by the priest. Before the reading of the epistle the Gloria is sung, at which point the altar candles are lit. Before the reading of the Gospel the Alleluia is sung for the first time since Lent began. The length of the Easter Vigil’s Liturgy of the Word allows the faithful to hear the great story of God's immense love for us since the beginning of time. Those gathered experience the magnificent scope of salvation history and appreciate how it was always meant to lead to Jesus Christ.

After the Liturgy of the Word comes the Liturgy of Baptism, where new members of the Body of Christ are initiated and welcomed into the Church. The catechumens are called forward to be presented by their godparents. After they are presented, they are processed, led by the Pascal Candle and followed by the priest, through the church to the baptismal font. While they process the Litany of the Saints in sung.

The priest then blesses the baptismal waters, by praying over the waters with his hands extended. He then lowers the Paschal Candle into the waters three times saying, “May the power of the Holy Spirit, O Lord, we pray, come down through your Son into the fullness of this font, so that all who have been buried with Christ by Baptism into death may rise again to life with him. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.”

After the baptismal waters have been blessed the catechumens are questioned regarding their desire for baptism and give a profession of faith. They then are baptized. Having received baptism, they are given a white garment and a baptismal candle. These represent the purity of their souls and the light of Christ that has been granted to them through baptism. Immediately following, newly baptized adults receive Confirmation. Later this evening, the now neophytes, will receive their first Eucharist, thus completing their initiation into the Church. Following these Baptisms and Confirmations all gathered renew their baptismal promises with lit candles in hand and are sprinkled with the baptismal waters.

The last part of the Easter Vigil, The Liturgy of the Eucharist proceeds in the usual way.

Why should we participate in the Easter Vigil?
The Easter Vigil is the last part of the Easter Triduum. Although involving three services on three days, (The Mass of the Lord’s Supper on Holy Thursday, The Celebration of the Lord’s Passion on Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday) the Triduum is considered a single celebration and is the summit of the Liturgical Year. These liturgies are both beautiful and powerful. As each is only offered once in each community, they are a tremendous opportunity for the whole community of the faithful to gather and worship together in a heightened way. Special attention has gone into the planning and preparing for these liturgies often making them very moving experiences for those who attend. The Easter Vigil is the high point of the Easter Triduum and the greatest liturgy of the Church calendar. It has an abundance of images, rituals, gestures, litanies, processions, and stories, all designed to connect us to the awesome power of God and the depth of His love for us.
Easter Vigil Reflection

Family Last Name: _______________________________________

First Names of Adult Participants: ____________________________

______________________________________________________

First Names of Youth Participants: ____________________________

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Has your family ever participated in the Easter Vigil before?

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How would you describe your Easter Vigil experience this year?

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What was something that stood out for you, particularly in the liturgy? Why did it stand out?

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Did the Easter Vigil help you to connect with God and/or our parish community? If yes, how? If not, why not?

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What is one thing about the Easter Vigil that you would like to share with others?

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