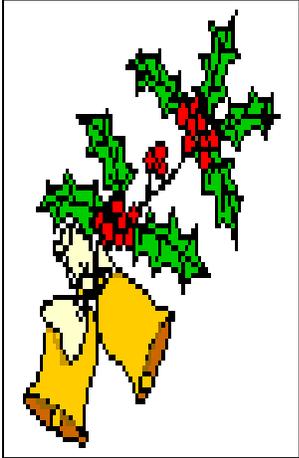


HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF SIMBANG GABI
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Archdiocese of San Francisco, 1997



The Nativity of Jesus was first celebrated in the Philippines in 1565. Introduced by Miguel Lopez de Legaspi, the Christmas celebration began with a novena of Masses starting on December 16 and ending on December 24 with a *noche buena* (Christmas family dinner) after the midnight Mass. This novena was called *Misa de Aguinaldo*, or Gift Masses. Since each of the novena Masses started at dawn with the cock's crow, the Masses later became known as *Misa de Gallo*. The Christmas novena became one of the best-loved and most celebrated traditions in all parts of the Philippines. To this day in most rural areas in the Philippines, people attend the *Misa de Gallo* without asking why the liturgy is celebrated at 4:00, or 5:00 o'clock in the morning.

However, the faster pace of life in metropolitan cities like Manila necessitated some adjustments in the time of *Misa de Gallo*. Some churches began to offer Christmas novena Masses at around 7:30 at night, to enable those working in graveyard shifts to make the novena in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. The name *Misa de Gallo* again changed to *Simbang Gabi* (night Mass). Today, whether the liturgies are celebrated at dawn or at night, the novena of Christmas Masses is still called *Simbang Gabi*.

Filipino-Americans have brought *Simbang Gabi* to the United States and have found it to be an effective way to build a community of faith. They can express who they are as a people, to celebrate their religious tradition and culture, and to reach out to Filipinos in the parish, particularly those who are not active in church. Because *Simbang Gabi* brings out so many beautiful Filipino values and evokes nostalgic memories of the Philippines, people are willing to make special effort to participate in the novena, in spite of the cold weather or tiring day at work. Choir members come an hour earlier each night to practice the songs, giving them the opportunity to know each other better and enjoy singing familiar Tagalog and English carols to their hearts' content. This is the time when inactive Filipinos are invited to participate as gift bearers and when Filipinos already involved in parish life take turns to be greeters, ushers, lectors, and Eucharistic ministers. Others get involved in decorating the church with *parol* (Christmas lanterns shaped as star, symbolic of the star that guided the Magi to the place where Jesus was born) and *belen* (the Nativity scene).





What is the catechetical challenge of Simbang Gabi? The first challenge is to realize that this is a teachable moment when the hearts of Filipinos are open for evangelization and catechisis. This is the time to proclaim that the Son of God born in a manger is a moving manifestation of the gentleness of God. This is the time to remind people that God's ways are not our ways, that God comes quietly and humbly without any pomp or pageantry, that God comes to us in the tenderness and gentility of the person reaching out to us in faith, love, peace, compassion, and sacrifice, that God comes to us when we bring His gentleness and tenderness to others.

The second challenge is to go back to the original meaning and value of Simbang Gabi as a time of spiritual preparation for Christmas. This preparation calls for deep reflection in order to remember the mystery of the Incarnation celebrated at Christmas. The novena days are a time to look into ourselves to see areas in our lives that need to be changed, so that we can welcome Christ more fully into our hearts. It is a time to look at the example of Mary who was always ready for the stirring of God's grace, who promptly responded to God's call to be His witness of love and service to the community.

When Simbang Gabi is understood from the perspective of these challenges, it transcends cultural boundaries and is a unifying time in the parish. It is an opportunity for everyone in the parish to be one community of faith, to wait, with Mary, in silence and prayerful anticipation for the birth of her Son Jesus, our Lord and Messiah.

