

The Simbang Gabi Novena

Posted on November 23, 2010 by [admin](#)



By Fr. Tirso Villaverde

Contributing Editor

“Ang Pasko ay sumapit! Tayo ay magsiawit ng magagandang himig dahil sa ang Diyos ay pagibig...”

For most Filipinos, even for those who may have grown up here in the United States, the Christmas season is incomplete without hearing “Ang Pasko ay Sumapit” at least once during the season of Christmas. Whether we want to believe it or not, yes, we have come to another holiday season. For Christians, the birth of Christ is one of the pivotal moments in our salvation history, the other being the death and resurrection of Jesus at Easter time. For Filipino Catholics (and perhaps other Christian denominations as well), the mystery of the Incarnation also is signaled by the age-old custom of the Simbang Gabi (or Misa de Gallo or Misa de Aguinaldo).

To understand the idea of nine days of [prayer](#), we have first to visit the idea of what is a “novena.” It has been a very ancient practice to extend the celebration of a major Christian feast either before or after the day itself. [Praying for](#) a longer period of time helps to emphasize the importance of the feast that is being celebrated. When the Spaniards came to the Philippines, there was already, in Spain, a long tradition of nine days of prayer for various feast days. Naturally, the Spanish friars adapted the custom for the first Filipino Christians.

During the 400 years colonization of the Philippines by the Spaniards, the friars took the pre-Christmas novena that was already the practice in Spain and adapted the custom to the cultural conditions of the early Filipino people. Realizing that most of the early Filipinos were farmers or fishermen, the Spanish friars chose the early morning hours to accommodate both groups. The farmers, of course, began their work before dawn and the fishermen were ending their work by dawn. Since the Masses during the novena began before the first rooster could be heard, the tradition was given the name, “Misa de Gallo” or “Mass of the Rooster.”

Today, the custom is more widely known as the “Simbang Gabi” (Mass at Night). The name still suggests a celebration of the Mass in the night hours. However, in the Philippines now, the Simbang Gabi novena of Masses is not only celebrated in the early morning hours but also in the evenings only to accommodate the numbers of faithful attending the Masses and completing the novena.

The Masses during the novena of Simbang Gabi have a more festive nature to them even though the nine days still take place in the last days of the Advent season—still seen as a more penitential time. Permission had been granted by the Vatican to celebrate the novena of Masses with a more festive character. For this reason, the priest's vestments during the novena are white rather than the usual Advent purple, the Gloria is sung even though it is still not Christmas Day, and Christmas Carols can already be sung during the Mass even though the birth of Christ has not been arrived. In so doing, Filipinos have actually begun to celebrate the mystery of the Incarnation nine days prior to the actual celebration of Christ's birth. Some have said that Filipinos just cannot wait to [start](#) "partying" so it was natural for Filipinos to want to celebrate Christmas as early as possible. Nonetheless, the permission to be more festive in nature has been in effect since the 17th century and has also been transferred to celebrations of the Simbang Gabi here in the United States.

When the Vatican granted the permission for the novena of Masses to be more festive, the Simbang Gabi novena was given two specific purposes. One, it was to be a novena in honor to the Virgin Mary in the last nine days of her pregnancy before giving birth to the Savior of the world. Secondly, it was to be a period of catechesis where the primary intention of every Mass was to be for the spread of the Catholic Christian faith.

Since Christmas marks the birth of God-made-flesh, it would only be natural for Catholic Christians to honor the Virgin Mary for nine days prior to the birth of Christ. For nine months, the Virgin Mary carried within her womb the baby who was and is the Son of God as well as God himself. When the Virgin Mary gave birth to Jesus, we witnessed the salvation of the entire world coming into our presence as a human child. With such an awesome mystery, it is only right that Filipino Catholics throughout the centuries journey with the Virgin Mary as she who gave birth to "God-with-us" again helps to announce the coming of the Son of God.

As was also mentioned, the nine days of prayer was also intended for the purpose of teaching the faithful the true tenets of the Christian faith. It was not just meant to be one long "party." The nine days of prayer was also meant to be a time when Filipino Catholics would learn more about the faith they embraced and rededicate themselves to living out that faith in everything they say and do. In this, the Simbang Gabi has a very spiritual purpose of encouraging Filipino Catholic Christians again to embrace the practice of the faith every day of their life. •