

Liturgical Rehearsal
Easter Vigil
(Gn 1; Gn 22; Ex 3)

The Easter Vigil is the longest and greatest of all the liturgies of the Catholic Church. This celebration reveals the intimate connection between Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist, and the connection is the Light of Christ, his Resurrection from the dead. In the course of the Easter Vigil, we solemnly rededicate the church which was stripped and left empty following Good Friday. The candle and holy water are blessed, the Eucharist is restored to the tabernacle, and the church is filled again with the faithful, newly reborn in baptism, or renewing baptismal covenants previously made.

The Easter Vigil echoes and memorializes year by year (as proclaimed in the prayer of dedication of the Paschal Candle) the Redemption accomplished once for all by Christ 2000 years ago. The Easter Vigil brings forward year by year, the work of the New Creation begun by Christ on that first Day of the new and final Biblical week. The Church is moving inexorably toward the final Sabbath day of God's glory, toward a new heaven and earth, when sin and death will be no more, where man can live and rejoice in his true heavenly city free of evil and darkness.

Thus the Resurrection occurs on the first day of a new week (Gn 1:5), when the earth is again a formless void of death, and darkness is upon the deep (Gn 1:2), with the Father again uttering forth His eternal Word with the words, "*Let there be Light!*" (Gn 1:3)

The Easter Vigil is a very intricate liturgical ceremony, and to be celebrated effectively it requires a good deal of long-range planning with the sacristans, choir practices, and an hour-long rehearsal with a team of most experienced altar servers. The more careful the preparations, the more smoothly and naturally the liturgy will flow, and thus the human element will not unnecessarily distract from the divine grace which needs to accomplish its work in the world. What is true (on a small scale) for our humble three-hour celebration, is also true on the grand scale of God's supreme "liturgy" which was accomplished in the original Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus. So much had to happen in the brief 32-year earthly life of the Son of God, in his brief 3-year public ministry, in the brief 7 days of his Holy Passover Week. All the threads of mankind's journey since Adam and Eve's sin had to be tied together. This "liturgy" of Christ was as big as Creation, as big as heaven and hell, because it had to undo sin and remake Creation new.

God the Father therefore undertook careful preparations for thousands of year, including rehearsal, with His chosen earthly ministers, so that when the High

Priest finally arrived on the scene, the liturgy could proceed without incident. How often do the Gospels note that everything had to be “just so” in order to fulfill Scripture? I.E., because a script of liturgical rubrics is being followed.

In the course of the seven Old Testament readings from the Easter Vigil, some of this long-range preparation and rehearsal is recounted. For instance, the second reading (Gn 22) tells the story of Abraham and Isaac. God commanded Abraham to take his beloved and only-begotten son to the land of Moriah and there sacrifice him upon a certain hill. Proceeding to the mountain with two servants and donkey, Abraham places the wood for the altar upon his son’s shoulders. At the place of sacrifice, he fastens his son to the wood, then proceeds to sacrifice him. However, at the last instant an angel intervenes to stay his hand. *This is only a rehearsal.* Isaac’s death (his blood) cannot accomplish the atonement which is necessary. Instead, a ram is substituted, and this becomes the pattern which the Old Testament ministers will practice until the coming of the true “Lamb of God.” Animals, especially the lamb, will be used as a substitute victim.

Having just completed Holy Week in which we recounted the details of Christ’s Passion, we recognize all the details “rehearsed” 2000 years before in the time of Abraham:

it is God the Father who sacrifices *His* beloved and only Son (Jn 3:16);
who on Palm Sunday is led by two disciples on a donkey (Mk 11:1-2);
up to the great hill of Mt Moriah in Jerusalem (cf. 2 Chronicles 3:1-2);¹
where he carries the wood of the Cross on his shoulders (Jn 19:17);
until fastened to the wood with nails (cf. Jn 20:25);
and this time drained of his blood with the knife (Jn 19:34).

Even the detail of Jesus’ crowning with thorns (Mk 15:17) is echoed in the rehearsal, by the ram whose horns were caught in a thorn bush (Gn 22:13)!

For 2000 years, beginning with Abraham, God knew exactly what He would do to undo the sin of Adam and restore the world. But it took Him 2000 years to select and train his ministers, setting in motion the patterns of priestly sacrifice necessary for great Atonement to take place.

Among the sacrifices one will stand out, and this is the Passover. It is not actually a Temple sacrifice, since it predates the inauguration of the Law at Mt. Sinai. This is the sacrifice which commemorates the liberation of Israel from slavery in Egypt, the “Passing over” of the angel of death so that the Chosen People did not die condemned as did the Egyptians, and the “Passing over” of the people themselves from the bondage of slavery, through the Red Sea, to freedom

¹ In the day of Abraham, at the time of the “rehearsal,” Jerusalem did not yet exist. That would wait another thousand years until King David established it as his capital, and King Solomon dedicated its Temple.

as God's children in the Promised Land. The third reading of the Easter Vigil recounts this event.²

Here too, in the time of Moses, God was "rehearsing" the salvation which would be accomplished by His Son. The Exodus of the Israelites perfectly illustrates and explains Baptism:

By the Passover sacrifice of Christ the Lamb of God;
whose Blood protects us from eternal death;
we are brought out of the slavery of sin
and the cruel dominion of the evil one
(whom we renounce in the baptismal ceremony);
into the temporary trial of the desert (i.e., this life);
during which time we are nourished by God's teaching;
and the Manna from heaven (Eucharist);
until we pass from this world to the Promised Land of heaven.

This deliverance is accomplished by our passage through the saving waters of baptism which both:

saves and renews us;
while washing away and drowning the demonic army and all evil.

Each year, the priest therefore takes time with all the various ministers and members of the parish, to prepare well for the celebration of the Easter Vigil, since it encompasses in itself all the other liturgies of the Church year. The more fully and worthily we celebrate this and any holy liturgy, the more we achieve the graces of Christ's death and resurrection manifested in them. Truly complete and conscious participation in the Liturgy becomes our life goal.

After so many thousands of years training and practice, the world's salvation was fully and perfectly accomplished in the liturgy of one week by Jesus Christ; so by our careful preparation and training in sacramental life, our salvation will be fully and perfectly accomplished as well.

² We also heard about the Passover a few days earlier, in the first reading of Holy Thursday.