

The Vigil Fire:

A Call to Encounter Christ

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Fearful. Terrified. Scared. These describe feelings that I had—and probably a good many children have—toward the darkness. Fear of the darkness as the lights went out for sleep, scared as the lights went out during a terrible storm. Then, as many candles were lit during the storm or the night light slowly brightened, a glow began to push out the darkness, and a sense of relief and peace set in. In the Church, there is an annual celebration where darkness has a pretty significant role to play, and that is the Easter Vigil.

As night descends on the evening of Holy Saturday (though in liturgical time it marks the beginning of Sunday), people gather outside the worship space, as a large, roaring fire lights up the night: faces glow, the heat warms those in colder climates, and passersby look in wonder at what is going on. Then, the vigil officially begins with the *Lucernarium*, which basically means a vigil or service of light. The large, roaring fire evokes the “fire of [God’s] glory” (*The Roman Missal*, 344). Fire is a natural symbol that conveys transformation. Fire provides heat in the cold and light in the darkness, and can bring destruction to houses and forests. Yet the fire of a flame atop a candle also can dispel the fear of the night for a child. Fire also purifies. The “fire” of a fever will try to “burn off” an infection and that used to boil water purifies baby bottles. While our human inclinations to fire might be both fear and terror, fire also can provide resources for life to survive, grow, and be transformed.

At the Easter Vigil, the people of God gather to “vigil,” to stay awake while praying and waiting for God to “in flame us” with his transforming light and warmth. The prayer texts of the blessing of the fire from *The Roman Missal* pray that this “fire of [God’s] glory, / sanctify + this new fire, we pray, / and grant that, / by these paschal celebrations, / we may be so inflamed with heavenly desires, / that with minds made pure / we may attain festivities of unending splendor. / Through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

This fire is blessed, so that we might be blessed through the evening and grow in discipleship, that is, to be “inflamed with heavenly desires.” As disciples not completely free from sin, we must continue to grow, as we encounter and participate in the Triune God who not only inflames us, but also works to



purify us, and calls us to follow the pilgrimage of life led by the light of God’s glory and splendor.

Next, the paschal candle is lit from the newly blessed fire. This candle represents Christ Jesus, who gave up his life so that life might triumph. Candles likewise “give up their life,” or decrease, so that the flame may continue to provide light and warmth. Out of death, God raised Christ from death to newness of life. The candle that represents Christ shows forth the God who transforms death into newness of life.

The flame of the candle is shared among those gathered who hold candles/tapers. In Baptism, we were given the flame of Christ within us as we were immersed in the baptismal font and then we (or our sponsors/godparents on our behalf) accepted the baptismal candle lit from the Easter fire. As the flame is shared among those gathered, brightness grows, and it is as we hear proclaimed at the Vigil: “a fire into many flames divided, / yet never dimmed by sharing of its light.” The sharing of Christ’s light does not dim, but rather the opposite: it multiplies and grows and begins to push out the darkness, which is sin, evil, hurt, and pain. This same flame we received in Baptism is shared with others, when we tend to their pain, hurt, and fears, so that new life might emerge. In truth, this is Christ the Light working in, with, and through us to bring about his transforming grace to those around us.

The Easter Proclamation—the Exultet—is chanted by the deacon (or in the absence of a deacon, a cantor or other minister). The proclamation praises and thanks God, who through Christ the Light, “dispels wickedness, washes faults away, / restores innocence to the fallen, and joy to mourners, drives out hatred, fosters concord, and brings down the mighty.”

The fire of the Easter Vigil calls us to encounter Christ the Light. In Baptism, we received Christ’s light and are called through our earthly pilgrimage to share Christ’s light with one another so that life might flourish.

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