



Pastor's Column

Vigil Masses

December 24, 2017 ~ Fourth Sunday of Advent ~ Vigil of the Nativity of the Lord

Sunday of course is Christmas Eve – in addition to being the 4th Sunday in Advent. Two distinct liturgical celebrations, two distinct holidays celebrated on the same day? How can that be possible? It is because of the Vigil Mass. So...what is a Vigil Mass?

There are days in the Church's liturgical year that are of highest importance, days of greatest solemnity: Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation (for example, Christmas). These days are of such great importance that we are actually obliged to go to Mass that day, on pain of mortal sin if we skip that Mass. Therefore, to help folks make an even easier time of it getting to Mass for the obligation, the Church has allowed there to be Vigil Masses; these are Masses for the holy day in question (such as Christmas) that are actually celebrated the evening prior to the day itself (such as Christmas Eve).

So, if we attend Mass on Christmas Eve, we have fulfilled the obligation of going to Mass on Christmas. If we attend the 4:30 PM Mass on Saturday afternoons here at St. Peter, we have fulfilled the Sunday obligation, even though it was a Mass on Saturday. How early a Vigil Mass can begin is a decision for the local bishop to make; here in the Diocese of Spokane, Bishop Daly has allowed the Vigil Masses for Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation to begin as early as 4 PM.

The Vigil Mass as such seems to be a throwback, as it were, to Christianity's Jewish roots; in the very first years of the nascent Church, Christians did not think of themselves as members of an all-new religion; they were still Jews, and they practiced the Jewish faith. But in short order, when Christian-Jews began to be persecuted because of how utterly different their faith is (after all, they professed Christ crucified and resurrected – Christ, the Son of God!), then they started to realize how unique they were in their faith and religious practices, and "it was in Antioch that [they] were first called Christians." (Acts 11:26)

For the Jews, remember, the day actually begins at sundown the evening prior; for example, for the Feast of Passover, all work had to cease by sundown the evening prior to Passover itself, for that was when the Feast began. The Catholic Christian's Vigil Mass is rooted in this.

In Catholic practice, the Vigil Mass generally is exactly the same as the Mass on the day itself, with some notable exceptions. One, and most obviously, the Easter Vigil Mass is actually incredibly different from Mass on Easter Sunday: Easter Vigil does not begin with the usual Sign of the Cross but instead begins with the ceremonial blessing and lighting of the Paschal Candle; also, there are at least three (and sometimes up to seven) Scripture readings (with accompanying Psalms) prior to the Gospel proclamation; also, there are usually Baptisms and/or Confirmations of adults in the midst of the Easter Vigil Mass. Other Vigil Masses are different from their Sunday counterparts usually only in what Scripture readings are assigned for a Mass: the Scripture readings for the Christmas Eve Mass are different from those of Christmas Mass at Midnight, Christmas Mass at Dawn, and Christmas Mass During the Day.

This Pastor Column topic was proposed by a parishioner who was curious about the Vigil Mass. If you have any questions about Church teaching, the liturgy, the saints, or anything at all having to do with our Catholic Christian faith, please contact the parish office.

~Fr. Lewis