

Notes for Next Year's Easter Vigil

By Daniel Martins

During the three decades of my ordained ministry, just as a practical discipline, I have cultivated the habit of making a few notes some days after Holy Week on how things went liturgically – something that might be consulted when it's time to make plans and preparations for the next cycle. It's been a helpful practice.

This go-round, my thoughts have tended to coalesce around the Easter Vigil. I participated in the Easter Vigil for the first time in 1976. It was a truncated observance – New Fire, two prophecies, renewal of vows, no Eucharist – into which about a dozen parishioners were lured by members of a monastic community who were taking care of us during a pastoral interim. Three years later, and without interruption since 1979, my experience of the Vigil – in six parishes and one seminary community – has been rather more robust, with never any fewer than five prophecies, rich ceremonial and music, baptisms in most of the years, and a festival celebration of the Eucharist.

Those early years for me, of course, were also the early years for the recovery/renewal of the Vigil across all the liturgy-grounded churches of the West. It was marketed as a “new thing that is really an old thing that we forgot about for a long time.” There was no shortage of hype, as the Great Vigil (along with the other reformulated Triduum rites) was sold by historical scholars, seminary faculty, and (some) bishops to parish clergy and the lay faithful, who were asked to change deeply ingrained habits and assumptions about how the Easter feast is properly kept.

In some places, it caught on in a big way, and still generates a high level of enthusiasm every year. In a few communities, it has yet to be even tried. In my completely unscientific and anecdotal survey, however, most have given it at least a shot. In some of those places, it has indeed taken, sometimes after considerable effort and persistence by the clergy. In others, it was tried, and even enjoyed modest success for a time, but has been laid aside in favor of the nearly irresistible momentum of the cultural celebration of Easter, or because of poor results in interest and attendance.

What has particularly caught my attention of late, however, is the experience of communities where the Vigil did indeed embed itself in the collective consciousness of the parish, where it has become “the way we've always done it,” yet perhaps *too* successfully. It has become routine, and suffers a deficit of energy and enthusiasm, a sense of “just going through the motions,” with slowly but consistently flagging attendance. Even in many places where the Vigil once eclipsed Easter morning as the primary focus of attention, it has become stale, tired, frayed around the edges.

As one who imprinted on the Catholic tradition at the high-water mark of the [Liturgical Movement](#), I am, of course, demurely dismayed by such a trend. I love the Easter Vigil, and believe it is the source, the mother lode, of all Christian worship. So I presume here to offer counsel – a bit theological, a bit practical and pastoral – to the end of breathing fresh life into the Great Vigil

of Easter.

Make the main thing the main thing. The Easter Vigil is any community's principal celebration of Easter. It deserves top billing. As long as it can be plausibly understood as an add-on, an optional extra for those who are into that sort of thing, it will be oxygen-deprived, and unable to thrive. The messaging for the Vigil needs to create the buzz of *the* cool kids table in a middle school lunch room. Easter morning is for those who are too lame to come to the Vigil. Easter morning, in fact, is the optional add-on, for those who are into that sort of thing.

It's a stark and simple truth: For the Vigil to increase, Easter morning must decrease. It needs to be made clear that, if you come to the Vigil, you are not only not expected to show up on Easter morning, you are expected to *not* appear on Easter morning. Very few clergy have the political capital to simply cancel worship on Easter morning, but they need to reach down and find the *chutzpah* to walk right up to that line without crossing it. The best musical resources should be directed to the Vigil, even if it means Easter morning suffers as a result. And if the Easter egg hunt and the flowering of the cross need to bite the dust, so be it.

(When my three children, who then ranged in age between 10 and 14, moved with me from a seminary environment to the parish where I served my curacy, they were astonished to learn that anybody ever went to church on Easter morning; the Vigil was the only experience of Easter they had ever known.)

Wait until dark. The very identity of the Great Vigil is that it is not an evening service. It is a *night* service. In antiquity, of course, night meant *all* night, with the baptisms occurring at dawn and the Eucharist celebrated in the morning light. I have known some communities that begin their Vigil at zero-dark-thirty, toward such an end. This approach is bold and has integrity. Most people, though, would rather go to bed late than get up early; hence, the custom of beginning when it is still perceptibly Saturday.

But I wince when I see pictures on social media of the New Fire being lit while there's still enough light to safely play a game of catch. Darkness — full-on, scary darkness — is at the core of what the Easter Vigil is; it is just incoherent without darkness. Many years ago, my wife invited an unbelieving relative to attend our parish Easter Vigil. This person had been raised in the evangelical subculture of the 1940s and 1950s, but had long since ceased any profession or practice of Christianity. One of the points in her after-action report was that, in the minutes before the fire was lit in the rear of the church, "It felt like a tomb." That much, at least, she got. Without any prompting or coaching, she immediately understood what that moment was about.

Party on. At the very least, have something akin to what Episcopalians know as *coffee hour* after the liturgy. Remember, post-liturgical socializing has been discouraged after the other two components of the Triduum (Maundy Thursday, Good Friday). The post-Vigil is an occasion for visiting trending toward revelry.

Start first, perhaps, with something like champagne and cake, then build out from there. In one of my parishes, we made tablecloths that were used only after the Vigil, thus creating a sensory

association that could be triggered from one year to the next. We had a professional chef in the parish, and he agreed to fix roast lamb – certainly not an inappropriate paschal repast. Those who had been baptized were given seats of honor.

In the parish that sent me to seminary in the mid-'80s, there was line dancing that carried on veritably until dawn. In my seminary community, children and youth were allowed, this one time in the year, to repeatedly ring the large bell that routinely calls the campus to prayer each day. I don't offer these details as prescriptions, but as examples of festive traditions that were cultivated organically within these congregations, that used resources at hand and accurately reflected the character of those congregations.

Give people stuff to do. Very often, parish clergy will look for efficiency when deploying their human resources. Are there good lectors among the members of the choir? Schedule them to do the readings. Is one member of a family down to be an usher? Put the spouse and/or kids to work as altar servers. In trying to revive the Easter Vigil, however, quite the opposite instinct is more helpful. Spread the workload as diversely as you can. Involve as many individuals – men, women, and children – as possible. If someone has a job to do, and they agree to do it, they'll at least be present! You have a better chance of reaching the critical mass necessary for the Vigil to move folks and make them want to come back in future years, whether they have a job or not.

Do I offer some kind of guarantee on this advice? Sorry, nope. Your mileage may vary. But I can say that I introduced the Easter Vigil in two different parishes following these precepts, and in both cases it worked. It captured people's hearts and imaginations and, I am convinced, greatly enriched their lives, their growth in the knowledge and love of the Lord. So give it a try.

<https://livingchurch.org/covenant/2019/05/14/notes-for-next-years-easter-vigil/>

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