



# The Easter Vigil Explained

## Introduction to the Easter Vigil

This is "mother of all vigils". It is the "greatest and most noble of all solemnities, all Catholic liturgies. On this holy night, the Church keeps watch, celebrating the resurrection of Christ in the sacraments and awaiting His return in glory. It is the turning point of the "Triduum" (the three holiest days of the year: Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Vigil Saturday). It is the Passover of the new covenant, which marks Christ's passage from death to life. Therefore, the Easter Vigil does not correspond to the usual Saturday evening Mass and its character is unique in the cycle of the liturgical year.

## The Elements and Parts of the Easter Vigil

### The Service of Light

Outside the Church, a blazing fire is prepared and people gather around it to experience the flames dispelling the darkness and lighting up the night. Thus the beauty of the fire, its warmth and its light draw the liturgical assembly together.

At the fire, The priest blesses the new, unlit Paschal Candle (also called the Christ Candle or the Easter Candle) is brought to the fire. This large candle can never be artificial and is renewed each year, symbolizing the truth that Christ is the light of the world, rising in glory, scattering the darkness of our hearts and minds.

The priest carves a cross into the candle with a stylus. Then he makes the Greek letter Alpha above the cross and the letter Omega below it, symbolizing that Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. Then, he carves the four numerals of the current year between the arms of the cross. Next, he lights the candle from the new fire and says: "May the light of Christ, rising in glory, dispel the darkness of our hearts and minds."

A deacon (or altar server or lay minister) takes burning coals from the fire and places them into a censer, and the priest places incense into it. The deacon accepts the Easter candle from the priest and a procession is formed to enter the church. First goes the incense leading the way, then the minister who's holding the candle, followed by the ministers of the Word and the priest and the people. All hold unlit candles. Just as the children of Israel were guided at night by the pillar of fire, so we Christians follow the risen Christ.

The priest stops the procession at the door of the Church and sings, "Christ our light" and everyone sings in reply, "Thanks be to God." We do this again in the middle of the Church, after which all light their candles, spreading the light from one to another. A third time we sing this, now in front of the altar.

As Mass begins, everyone takes their seats. (Notice that the tabernacle is empty.)