

Looking Forward to the Easter Vigil

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I am looking forward to the Easter vigil this year. It's the united effort of five parishes, each contributing their best talent to beautify the celebration, and it usually draws enough people to make it a real celebration.

It was not always thus for me. For fourteen years, I was the lone pastor in two rural parishes. These two very different places had one thing in common: a major difficulty when Holy Saturday came round. Low population numbers in these country parishes meant there were few people to call on who had the skills needed to plan and execute the Easter vigil. In addition, the change in schools' Easter holidays meant more and more families travelled away for the Easter weekend, many of them abroad. When those holidays didn't begin until Spy Wednesday, families thought differently about the time of year and often stayed in their native place to participate in the liturgies there. Now churches are often

bereft of ceremony attendees, so the pooling of resources across many parishes makes more sense than ever.

We have been doing common Easter vigil in the family of parishes where I minister for the past two years. Those who attend our ten churches in the five parishes that make up our ecclesiastical unit are all invited to the cathedral in the central shopping town of Skibbereen to celebrate the resurrection with one voice.

Naturally, like any big liturgy, the Easter vigil does not just happen. Meetings precede it, involving people from each parish. Ministers of the Word decide between themselves who will look after which reading. The parish that looks after a particular reading (and the Easter vigil provides several) also looks after the singing of the psalm that follows it – something that would never be possible if only one parish organised the vigil.

Last year an extra detail was added. One priest liaised with the sacristans in the ten churches, encouraging each of them to come to the Easter vigil, bearing the paschal candle they were to use, to be blessed. He met the representatives before the ceremony and made sure they gathered round the Easter fire to witness the very special opening moment, their candles then being lit from the cathedral's

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Pope Francis leads the Easter vigil Mass in St Peter's Basilica on Holy Saturday, 2014

own candle. Covid-19 has provided every parish with a ceremony in which the lighting of the Easter candle is enthroned at Easter Sunday morning Mass, making a perfect conclusion to the vigil in the central church.

Having a team of four priests leading the Easter vigil means a division of labour, which makes the celebration more feasible. Last year, one of us presided over the celebration, a second read the gospel and preached, a third looked after the sacristans and the fourth liaised with the choirs and sang the Exultet (that was my role in 2023).

The latter role can be the most challenging. It's not that musicians are difficult to deal with; it's that they are not used to sharing their role with other choirs in the same ceremony. In the cathedral last year, two great choirs came together, with each looking after a part of the four-part ceremony and check-

ing that the psalmists were ready to chime in. My role as Exultet singer led to several rehearsals during which the choir sang from the far-off gallery by the organ, and I sang from the ambo, the choir director keeping us together. The actual vigil added a complication: in the darkness the choir could not see me, and neither the choir nor I could see the conductor attempting to keep us together. Yet by the miracle added by the glory of the occasion, no one noticed the cracks!

Another innovation was added in 2023: a social event followed the vigil, at least for the most active participants. Pastoral council members in the central church kindly baked cakes and made tea, which led to all the singers singing well into the night, pushing to the back of the mind the thought that we would do it all again that self-same Easter morning.