

COURIER-JOURNAL

• April 10, 1985 •

A supplement to Catholic newspapers, published by the National Catholic News Service, 1312 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20005. All contents copyright © 1985 by NC News Service.

Faith Today

Night of fire and light

By Father John Gurrieri
NC News Service

"This is the night" — when most Christians lose every fear of the haunting darkness of childhood which never leaves our psyches.

"This is the night" — when the ghosts and ghostly visions of sleeplessness are replaced by the joyful wakefulness of expectation.

This night is Easter. The expectation is of the resurrection.

"Night truly blessed when
"heaven is wedded to earth...
"Most blessed of all nights,
"chosen by God to see Christ
"rising from the dead!"

The night is the Easter Vigil. The poetry is from the Easter Proclamation — the Exultet — sung by the deacon with the joy of an eyewitness of Christ's rising, of the stone before the tomb being thunderously rolled away to make way for the procession of the risen Lord into a world both unbelieving and struck by fear that one who has died a cruel and miserable death now lives, and lives forever.

The Easter Vigil celebrates in the most lavish manner possible the central mystery of Christian faith: the saving death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the darkness of night, with no illumination of any kind, the church gathers around a pile of sticks and charcoal, ready to kindle a fire and to light a candle, prepared to proclaim and to move in procession proclaiming, "Christ our light!"

Perhaps no other liturgical ritual in our Roman Catholic tradition is so powerful as the fire, incense, candle and candlelit procession of the Easter Vigil. Certainly no other liturgical feast is organized in what appears to be such a complex structure.

For sure, no other liturgical solemnity takes as long as the Easter Vigil! We Roman Catholics, so habituated to brief, sober and simple rites, completely lose our heads liturgically during the Easter Vigil.

Why this departure from our usual ritual sobriety? Christ is risen and this

is the night on which he rose from the dead!

The Easter Vigil is really four liturgies united by one common mystery.

—It is a liturgy of light. The resurrection is proclaimed in every possible sign, symbol or metaphor of light. Our Christian faith is described as "enlightenment" and sin is named darkness.

—It is a liturgy of the word. The assembly hears as many as nine readings from the Scriptures, retelling God's compassionate love from the first day of creation to the end of the world.

—It is a liturgy of baptism and initiation into the mysteries of Christ. Men and women are baptized, confirmed and received into the eucharistic community. This liturgy abounds in signs: the symbol of water, destructive and life-giving; the symbol of oil, soothing and consecratory; the gesture of laying on hands, priestly and confirming in strength.

—It is the liturgy of the Eucharist, the sacrificial banquet in which the very death and resurrection are made present to sanctify and renew the assembly.

The Easter Vigil is all this and more! When the priest lights the new Easter candle, he expresses the hope that wells up in our hearts: "May the light of Christ, rising in glory, dispel the darkness of our hearts and minds."

The Easter Vigil is our greatest vigil, our highest form of expectation and perhaps the only human expectation we are certain will be fulfilled. It is the celebration of the hope that is never disappointed.

When he was still archbishop of Cracow, Poland, Pope John Paul II wrote a collection of poems called "Easter Vigil and Other Poems." In the poem which gives the collection its name, he described a dialogue between a man and God.

The two speak of human existence and our mortal bodies, of death and survival. Gradually in the poem God brings the dialogue to a point where hope and expectation are reborn in the man's heart: Death is no more,



No other liturgical service is as powerful or as central to our faith as the Easter Vigil, writes Father John Gurrieri. Bound up in this liturgy is the joy, the mystery and the reality of the resurrection.

for "we stand in front of our future which closes and opens at the same time...the past is the time of birth, not of death."

In our Easter Vigil of dialogue with God, we experience the past as our "time of birth," because in the death of Christ there was life; Christ's very death leads to our resurrection as it did to his own.

The Easter Vigil dispels the darkness and fear of doors closing in our faces. A door to the past is thrown open, a brilliant light shines through, and our vision catches sight of the future.

(Father Gurrieri is director of the U.S. bishops' Committee on the Liturgy.)