

Vigil models faith journey

Scott J. Rutan/CNS

The Easter Vigil begins in darkness, in loss and abandonment. Every adult's faith journey also starts there, in confusion, lack of clarity and security, in the face of truly difficult questions: What is right and good? What is sinful? What really happens when I die? What am I supposed to do about injustice?

At the Easter Vigil, a light shines in the darkness. First it is just a new fire, giving off warmth like a distant memory. Then, a new flame arises from it. A candle is held aloft, and we look up. "Christ our Light!" the deacon sings. We respond, "Thanks be to God!"

We remember that it is Christ who enters the darkness of our lives, bringing a sense of clarity, calmness and hope that did not exist before. In the Easter Vigil, his light is rekindled in us.

The story of faith is broken open through the proclamation of the word. The familiar Scriptures remind us that we are created by and for God, that all are delivered from sin, that our lives are perpetual sacrifice and we will return to God. This cycle of life, death and rebirth is at the heart of Easter faith.

With Christ's light pushing back the darkness and God's word filling our hearts, we who gather for the Easter Vigil move together toward the baptismal water of new birth. We fearfully, yet joyfully, renounce evil and profess faith in the Triune God.

We also support those coming to the baptismal font for the first time. Entering as sinners, they emerge as saints. Baptism is the perfect metaphor for an adult faith that goes deeper into the mystery of Christ's saving power and rises to greater life.

The Easter Vigil next takes each adult to the eucharistic meal-banquet-sacrifice-thanks-giving. All eyes finally are open. Our Lord and Savior is made real, whole and entire. Our "Amen!" is the boldest of faith statements.

Finally we hear with new ears: "Go in peace, Alleluia! Alleluia!" "Thanks be to God, Alleluia! Alleluia!" is the only possible response.

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Candle symbolizes Christ

Father Lawrence E. Mick/CNS

Ancient legends explain that fire was stolen from the gods! The day our ancestors learned to tame and control fire for warmth and cooking marked a major step in human cultural evolution.

Fire naturally found a place in religious rituals, too. In Christian worship, fire generally is used for light rather than warmth. Worshipers gather around the Easter fire, kindled in the darkness of Holy Saturday night. The fire's light overcomes the darkness.

From this paschal fire we light the paschal candle — a strong symbol of Christ as the light of the world. This candle then leads our way from the fire outside into the church where we celebrate the Easter sacraments.

The paschal candle's origins are not entirely clear. A special paschal candle is first cited in papal ceremonies in the late 11th century. But much earlier, in the fourth century, St. Jerome was asked to compose a song for the candle, presumably like the "Exsultet" used at the Easter Vigil today. St. Augustine apparently composed a similar hymn in North Africa around the same time.

The practice of cutting into the candle a cross as well as the characters alpha and omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, is described in a seventh-century Spanish liturgical book. And Venerable Bede in seventh-century England writes about inscribing the year's date on the candle.

The paschal candle clearly is intended as a symbol of the risen Christ, who is the light of the world and whose resurrection destroyed the darkness of sin. As the presider at the liturgy cuts the cross, the alpha and omega, and the date into the candle, he proclaims: "Christ yesterday and today, the beginning and the end, Alpha and Omega; all time belongs to him and all the ages; to him be glory and power through every age forever. Amen."

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Without sunlight, we just wouldn't be here. Our very survival depends upon it. Sunlight makes things grow and sustains life.

We see — where we're going, what we're looking for, what needs doing — much better with sunlight than with the light of a quarter moon, of course.

And we feel better in sunlight. It lifts our mood.

Lots of people in the ancient world probably thought the Christians



CNS photo by Bill Wittman

IN A NUTSHELL

The paschal candle symbolizes Christ as the light of the world.

The paschal candle is a symbol of the risen Christ, whose Resurrection destroyed the darkness of sin.

Whenever baptism is celebrated throughout the year, the paschal candle is lit again. It serves as the source of light for all baptismal candles, linking us back to the Easter celebration.

As he lights the candle from the new fire, the presider says, "May the light of Christ, rising in glory, dispel the darkness of our hearts and minds."

Following the candle into the darkened church calls to mind the journey of the Israelites through the desert, led by a pillar of cloud during the day and a pillar of fire at night. The "Exsultet" suggests this when it proclaims, "This is the night when the pillar of fire destroyed the darkness of sin" and calls the candle "a

pillar of fire that glows to the honor of God."

Later in the liturgy the paschal candle is carried to the baptismal font for the blessing of its water. It is plunged into the water (once or three times) to symbolize the power of Christ making fertile the womb of the font in order to bring forth new life. Those who are baptized then are given baptismal candles lit from the paschal candle, symbolizing the light of Christ they are to carry in their lives.

Whenever baptism is celebrated throughout the year, the paschal candle is lit again, serving as the source of light for all the baptismal candles, linking us back to the Easter celebration of baptism.

And whenever a member of the community dies, the paschal candle is placed near the casket. The candle serves as a reminder of the promise of resurrection that flows from baptism into Christ.

Christ lights the way from beginning to end. He is truly the light of the world.

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were making extravagant claims by calling Christ the light of the world. Many ancients thought the sun was a god and worshiped it. The suggestion that the light to depend on was the light of Christ must have sounded astonishing. I can imagine that some ancients were outraged.

Today we're accustomed to calling Christ the light of the world. It's really an Easter message that the risen Christ is life-giving; that people grow in his light; that it is an illuminating source of happiness; that with Christ's light, people "see" better —

see how to get where they must go, even see the light of Christ reflected by others, including those they might otherwise have ignored.

LEND US YOUR VOICE

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