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Lighten the darkness

The symbols and images associated with the Easter Vigil must properly evoke the drama of what is celebrated. And, since the liturgy is not for the faint-hearted, any time devoted to catechetical preparation will be well spent

When reflecting on the Easter Vigil, two experiences immediately spring to my mind. The first is of a minimalist Easter fire consisting of a bag of kindling, lit in a biscuit tin, placed on a chair from the parish hall in the middle of the school playground. The second is of a young woman running into the church having missed the Service of Light and Liturgy of the Word and asking the usher breathlessly, "Have I missed Mass?" to which he responded, "No. We haven't started yet." Technically, we might say he was right, but somehow, the impression was that we'd been watching the adverts while waiting for the feature film.

St Augustine called the Easter Vigil the "mother of all holy vigils". The sights, sounds, smells, textures and tastes of the vigil are a vibrant celebration of Resurrection conveying that deep sense of movement – from the tomb of Holy Saturday to the Garden of Easter, movement from darkness to light, from death to life. It is the turning point, the pivotal moment. Icons of the Resurrection capture the depths of the activity taking place while we pray, watch and wait. There are images of Christ tearing down the gates of hell, scattered bones, shattered rocks, dark places and Christ in radiant light dragging humanity in the forms of Adam and Eve out of the tomb.

When we celebrate the Easter Vigil with the kind of experiences above, one has to ask whether we have somehow missed the point. The numbers attending the vigil remind us that it is not a liturgy for the faint-hearted. Only the most committed parishioners will be there – together with those who are to be baptised or received into the Church – and it is no coincidence that this is the liturgy where we receive them.

To enable people to celebrate the vigil with understanding, we can (re)turn to one of the fundamental tasks of catechesis: liturgical education. This does not mean interrupting the flow of the liturgy at every turn to ex-

plain what is happening. Developing catechesis for liturgy, catechesis through liturgy and mystagogy (reflecting on what has been celebrated and how we experience it in our lives as individuals and Church) offers a challenge to us.

Catechesis for liturgy includes preparation. In one parish I know, they prepared for the Easter Vigil by taking some time during Holy Saturday to pray and reflect on the words of the "Exultet". They printed a copy of it, together with a series of questions for reflection – asking people what word or phrase struck them, what questions it evoked, what story it tells. People were invited to think about how it connected with their lives and the life of their parish and the world. Their word or phrase became the basis of their prayer throughout the day. We only

sing the "Exultet" once each year so it is worth making the effort to make the most of it.

In another parish, people spend time with the Liturgy of the Word, looking at the texts, the psalms and the prayers as a whole. People who do not have missals are offered scripture references. Again, similar questions for reflection are offered, helping to make connections between the great symbols of the vigil, the fire, the light, the water and where and how they appear in the scripture readings and psalms of the vigil.

Liturgical catechesis is not only about texts, but about ritual, symbols and actions. Catechesis through the liturgy speaks through word and music, symbol and gesture. It is multi-sensory – experienced in sound, sight, taste, smell and touch. It is through the experience of word and symbol, language and the senses that we are drawn into the vigil's celebration of the paschal mystery. After all, the catechism tells us that the liturgy "is the summit towards which the activity of the Church is directed ... it is the privileged place for catechising the People of God".

Back to the biscuit tin. In "Paschale Solemnitatis", the 1988 letter from the Congregation

for Divine Worship concerning the Easter celebrations, we are told that the flames of the Easter fire, like the pillar of cloud in the wilderness, "should be such that they genuinely dispel the darkness and light up the night". From Easter fire to paschal candle, the symbol of the risen Christ, "a flame divided but undimmed", the light passes to the gathered people of God – "the light of Christ, rising in glory dispelling the darkness of our hearts and minds". This really does need a fire, not kindling in a biscuit tin.

During the Liturgy of Baptism, we are again drawn into the movement of dying and rising expressed in the reading from Paul's letter to the Romans. Through the light and water and renewal of our baptismal promises we experience again the mystery of baptism. During the weeks of Lent, a parish in Grimsby invited everyone coming to the Easter Vigil to wear something white as a sign of solidarity with and welcome to the newly baptised and as a sign of their own baptism.

Thankfully, we have the whole of the Easter season to reflect on what has taken place, what has been celebrated. As we leave the Easter Vigil, with the resounding "Alleluias", we reflect on what it means to believe in the risen Christ, believe in the Resurrection and to live the Resurrection:

To believe in the Resurrection means for me that Jesus is not a mere memory; he continues to live by the power of God, and to speak to me across the frontiers of death ...

The Resurrection means that Jesus lives on with such a fullness of life that he is able to animate a whole community of people.

From H.J. Richards, *A Worship Anthology for Lent and Easter* (Kevin Mayhew, 1994)

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