

Easter Vigil: April 11, 2020

Tonight's liturgy is traditionally called the "Easter (or Paschal) Vigil". The term "vigil" has entered very much into our modern vocabulary because of how often we hear of or maybe even participate in vigils today. Usually, as tonight normally is, these are candlelight vigils and they take place as a show of community support for those experiencing tragedy, like a sudden death.

However, the religious tradition of vigil is a little different from that. Keeping vigil, as it's often put, essentially means "watching and waiting". A family might keep vigil at the bedside of someone who is close to death, or in the waiting room of the maternity unit of a hospital. A spouse may keep vigil for someone in the military who has told them they are on the way home from a deployment. Keeping vigil in this way is an active waiting for something we know is going to happen, but perhaps we don't know exactly when. In the meantime, we continue to support one another with our presence, our love and, tonight especially, with our prayers.

The Easter Vigil, where the light comes to dispel the darkness, represents the community of faith joining together, usually in person (though, like now, not always) to keep vigil for the celebration of Jesus's resurrection on the third day after his crucifixion and burial.

Throughout the course of Christian history, the vigil has been celebrated in times of prosperity and times of want, in times of war and in times of peace, in times of reasonable certainty about what the future holds and in times like now when the present, not just the future, is profoundly uncertain.

Tonight, I'd like to call to mind some of those people I know who are keeping vigil with us. Their stories today are representative of Christian throughout the world on this Holy Night. I share them, simply to focus our minds and hearts and to remind us that, no matter where we are

tonight, we do not keep vigil alone; and that our Risen Savior has returned and will, once again, dispel the darkness of disease, isolation, separation, fear, depression and anxiety.

Tonight, we keep vigil with an Air Force Reserve surgeon from Northern California. Just this past week he was called up again and left his family, wife and four children—the oldest a freshman in college and the youngest in 8th grade. Tonight, he keeps vigil with us from the emergency room of a hospital in New York. And we keep vigil with him.

Tonight, we keep vigil with a public high school teacher who is due to have her first child in less than three weeks. However, less than six weeks before her baby was due, her school closed and she and her husband, who is also a teacher began to teach through distance learning. In addition to the normal anxiety about the upcoming birth of her first child, she also worries about the uncertainties caused by the coronavirus, its impact on the hospital where she will give birth, and many other issues that no one in her position could possibly have expected as they wait the joyful arrival of their first child. Tonight, she and her husband keep vigil with us, and we keep vigil with them.

Tonight, we keep vigil with those who were expecting to receive the sacraments of initiation at the Easter Vigil tonight. Those in our parish and in parish around the world who will have to wait for an indeterminate period of time to become full members of our Catholic faith community and join us at the table of the Eucharist for the first time. They set out on this journey and entered the Lenten season expecting to have the joy of professing their faith and being sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit. Also, on that journey are the young people of our parish who were to receive First Holy Communion and Confirmation this Spring and don't now know when that will happen. Tonight, they keep vigil with us, and we keep vigil with them.

Tonight, we keep vigil with families from our parish and other places who have recently lost someone they love. Perhaps it was an expected

death, but one that was made much harder to handle by difficulty of access to a retirement or care home. Perhaps it was a sudden or unexpected death where family and friends cannot gather in a candlelight vigil or in another way to support one another. Whatever the circumstances, the grief is compounded by the uncertainty of not knowing when funerals or celebrations of life will happen. Tonight, they keep vigils with us, and we keep vigil with them.

Tonight, we keep vigil with engaged couples from our parish and elsewhere whose wedding plans have been thrown into disarray.

We keep vigil with students who won't be able to celebrate graduation with their classmates.

We keep vigil with those in the military and their families who, even though they are used to uncertainty, have yet another reason to wonder about when they will be reunited.

We keep vigil with first responders, medical personnel and others who work in essential jobs that bring them in contact with others on a daily basis.

We keep vigil with an elementary school student who is getting ready to begin another round of cancer treatment this week, and with her family.

We keep vigil with those who have tested positive for the virus and those who are ill with it and with their families.

We keep vigil with those who are far from home because they were travelling when the virus began to spread and have been unable to rejoin those they love at home.

We keep vigil with those who are isolated alone, and with families who are still struggling to cope with the stress of being together 24/7 and trying to maintain some sense of normalcy.

These are but a few of the situations in which we and those we love and care about find themselves on this Holy Night.

They keep vigil with us, and we keep vigil with them.

But we also keep vigil with the two women named Mary in today's gospel—the first chosen by Jesus to be witnesses to his disciples and to the world of the joy and hope of the resurrection.

We keep vigil with them as they walk under the gradually rising light of the sun that dispels the physical darkness toward their encounter with the Risen Son of God who dispels the darkness of all uncertainty, fear and anxiety.

And we hear again, but this time addressed to us, the words of the angel and of Jesus: Do not be afraid.

And we hear again the words I quoted on Thursday from the late Cardinal Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan as on his time in solitary confinement under the Vietnamese Communist regime. These words tell us how we can truly keep vigil on this Holy Night and in the continuing darkness of the current pandemic and its effect on all our lives:

All prisoners, myself included, constantly wait to be let go. I decided then and there that my captivity would not be merely a time of resignation but a turning point in my life. I decided I would not wait. I would live the present moment and fill it with love. For if I wait, the things I wait for will never happen. The only thing that I can be sure of is that I am going to die.

No, I will not spend time waiting. I will live the present moment and fill it with love.