



Source: Pasko! The Philippine Christmas.

Simbang Gabi, a cherished Christmas tradition.

On December 15, 2019 Gaudete Sunday, Pope Francis celebrated Simbang Gabi Mass in St. Peter's Basilica for Rome's Filipino community, the first Pope to do so in centuries of Filipino Christmas Advent preparation. Pope Francis said, "This Filipino devotion has crossed national borders and has arrived in many other countries."

Indeed, Simbang Gabi is celebrated throughout Europe, North America, and all over the world where Filipino Catholic community thrives in deep faith, devotion to the Blessed Mary and the church. Pope Francis continues, "You have a special mission. Your faith is 'leaven' in the parish communities to which you belong. I encourage you to increase opportunities to share your cultural and spiritual wealth and be enriched by the experiences of others." This religious tradition transforms a community of believers sharing the practice with generations of family and children.

Simbang Gabi is a cherished Filipino Christmas tradition, which is celebrated with great expectation and joy by 78 million Filipinos in the Philippines and other parts of the world. It is a spiritual preparation for Christmas and commemorates the birth of Jesus Christ. It is a series of nine dawn Masses, in honor of the Blessed Virgin, starting December 16th and ends at midnight on the 24th of December when a midnight Mass is held. Simbang Gabi, literally meaning Night Mass, is also known by its popular Spanish name, Misa de Gallo, or "Mass of the Rooster."

Simbang Gabi traces its roots in 1587 when the Pope granted Fray Diego de Soria, prior of the convent of San Agustin Acolman, to hold Christmas Mass outdoors to accommodate the huge numbers of people attending.

In the olden days, Simbang Gabi starts at 4 o'clock a.m. when the rooster crows, before the break of dawn, with church bells ringing to welcome the faithful to Simbang Gabi Mass. Pre-dawn Masses enable fishermen and farmers to attend Mass prior to field work in a rich agricultural country. Throughout the centuries the celebration of Simbang Gabi has been preserved and sustained in spite of pastoral and liturgical transformation. In 1953 the First Plenary Council of the Philippines petitioned Rome for Papal Indult for nine days novena Masses. Rome granted the continuation of this Indult for Mass celebrated early morning in honor of the Virgin Mary in which the interplay of light and darkness convey the meaning of Advent. White is the authorized liturgical color and with great solemnity the Gloria is sung and other Christmas hymns.

Traditionally, at the conclusion of Simbang Gabi novena, a festive celebration of holiday delicacies bring out special dishes such as lechon, pancit, lumpia, rice cakes, chicken relleno, pastries, queso de bola, salabat hot ginger tea, leche flan crème caramel, and arroz caldo soup to be shared with family, which in the Filipino culture extends to uncles (titos) and aunties (titas) and kapitbahay (neighbors) and friends. Food heightens the sense of connectedness, passion and commitment of Filipino faithful in projecting the importance of faith, community and tradition. Food serves as a cultural and spiritual memory.

Holiday ornamentation invariably includes the iconic Filipino Christmas parol (lantern) reminiscent of the Star of Bethlehem. Another iconic Filipino Christmas tradition is the display in homes of the belén – a creche depicting the Birth of Jesus Christ in the manger surrounded by the Virgin Mary, St Joseph and farm animals. Often the menagerie includes the Three Kings bearing gifts for Baby Jesus, shepherds, and camels. Belén is the Spanish word for Bethlehem.

In Chicago at Holy Name Cathedral, Simbang Gabi is an annual event in December hosted by the Cathedral Filipino Network (CFN), an initiative organized by Father John P. Boivin and a group of Filipino parishioners in 2000. Simbang Gabi is usually an evening Mass on a weekday to accommodate office workers to join the Christmas novena and celebration. CFN has a mission to share with the parish community the Filipino Catholic culture and religious heritage. CFN has organized parish-wide pilgrimages, Lenten retreats, workshops, Feast of Santo Nino in January, and fundraisers for Holy Name. CFN members are active liturgy volunteers serving as ushers, commentators, lectors, altar servers and Eucharistic Ministers of Holy Communion. Some are members of parish commissions and pastoral council.

CFN is a member of the Archdiocese of Chicago Asian Catholic Initiative (ACI), which coordinates Simbang Gabi celebration in 70 Chicago parishes from December 16th to December 23rd.

In this tumultuous year, ACI officially announced to hold off celebration due to pandemic. However, a few parishes have scheduled Simbang Gabi following stringent compliance from the Archdiocese health and safety protocols. This year there is no choir, no procession of parols and offerings, and no reception.

Queen of All Saints Basilica will livestream Simbang Gabi on December 19, 2020 starting at 7:00 PM. Registration for Mass attendance is required.

It's a different kind of Christmas with an aching physical vacuum. Yet the heart and essence of the Season remains full in our hearts. We remain profoundly rooted in our joyful anticipation for the coming of Christ, Our Savior.

Rejoice! Rejoice the Lord is near!

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