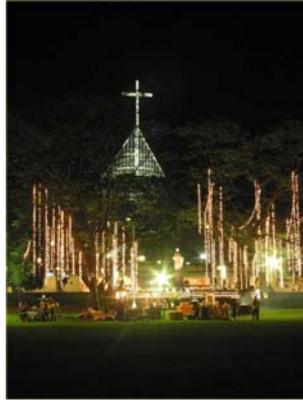


On Simbang Gabi

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Theologically, the liturgical year is the celebration of the memory of Christ's paschal mystery every week or Sunday and once a year during the Easter Triduum. It unfolds the mystery of Christ from his incarnation to his second coming. The liturgical constitution clearly defines as the theological content of the liturgical year the saving work of Christ, the mystery of redemption, the whole paschal mystery of Christ, which the Church celebrates every eighth day and in the course of the liturgical year, and proclaims during the feasts of the BVM and the saints.[1] From these conciliar texts we may say that the whole paschal mystery, which enfolds the whole mystery of Christ from his incarnation to Pentecost and his second coming, permeates the entire liturgical year. Thus, the paschal mystery of Christ serves as the axis around which revolves the liturgical year. All liturgical feasts, inclusive of those commemorating the various aspects of Christ's life as Christmas and Easter, center on this same mystery.

Our Filipino celebrations of the liturgical year reflect forms of popular religiosity that have arisen and been accepted throughout the ages. They are a sure sign of the extent to which the faith has taken root in the hearts of our people and of its influence on the daily lives of the faithful. Regarded as a treasure of the Church, our popular pious exercises allow our people to express our faith and our relationship with God and Providence, with Our Lady and the Saints, with neighbors, with the dead, with creation and strengthens membership of the Church.[2] They are a testimony of the faith of the simple of heart, underlining the one or the other accent without pretending to embrace the whole content of the Christian faith. Our popular religiosity is a living reality in and of the Church; its source is the constant presence of the Spirit in ecclesial communities; its reference point, the mystery of Christ; its object, the glory of God and the salvation of man; and its historical moment, the joyous encounter of the work of evangelization and culture.[3] The Church, for her part, does "*respect and foster the qualities and talents of the various races and nations. Anything in these people's way of life which is not indissolubly bound up with superstition and error, she studies with sympathy, and, if possible, preserves intact. She sometimes even admits such things into the liturgy itself, provided they harmonize with its true and authentic spirit*".[4] If, on the one hand, popular religiosity must not take the place of liturgy, liturgy, on the other hand, does not eliminate the other forms of expressing the faith in Christ the Savior.[5] Likewise, it is important to recall that popular religiosity finds its natural crowning in liturgical celebration, toward which it has to be ideally oriented, even if habitually it does not flow into it.[6]



Our [Catholic] religious culture began with the coming of the Spanish missionaries. The Philippines as a former colony of Spain shares and preserves faithfully much of its colonizers' religious traditions, putting on local color and character. For example, we have what the Spaniards called "*Misa de Aguinaldo*", which we would call "*Simbang Gabi*" culminating with the "*Panuluyan*" held immediately before the Christmas Midnight Mass. This form of religiosity is still very much alive in our midst nowadays.

Whenever the "*-ber*" months of the year set in, for us Christmas is so close and for some it has in fact come. That is why everywhere you will hear Christmas carols being played and the Christmas spirit dominating the air. Everyone, not only children, begin to flock to malls and shopping centers to buy Christmas decors and ornaments to adorn their houses; these include Christmas trees, star-shaped lanterns ("*parol*") and cribs ("*belen*"). The spirit is very much in contrast with the Advent liturgy, which, though its mood is one of joyful expectation, yet calls for restraint in the use of "*Gloria*", musical instruments, ornamentations; the use of purple vestment reminds us also of exercising some restraints in our liturgical celebrations.

Every year, from December 16 to 24, parish churches and barangay chapels teem with people from all walks of life for a pious exercise that has become so popular among Filipino Catholics all over the world.[7] This form of popular piety is known as "*Misa de Aguinaldo*", also called "*Simbang Gabi*".[8] It is a novena of Masses in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Expectant Mother of God, and in preparation for the commemoration of the birth of our Savior.[9] This popular religious custom is considered among the oldest and the most venerable religious traditions in our country. In contrast to the sober character of the Advent liturgy, these Masses are festive in character and are said with special solemnity: the "*Gloria*" and, before, also "*Credo*" as well as Christmas carols, are sung even on the 3rd and 4th Sundays of Advent (but *only* during the *Misa de Aguinaldo*), white vestments are used even on Sunday, the church and sanctuary are festively decorated, and approved musical instruments are played.[10] Nowadays, if any of these days fall on Sunday, the Mass formularies and readings are those of Sunday.[11] The intention for the celebration of the "*Misa de Aguinaldo*" is: "*pro constantia Indorum in fide et pro religionis conservatione in his partibus, quae causa gravissima sane et publica est; quippe maxima est ratio quae pro Religione militat*".[12] It is to be noted that, for our people, the celebration of the nativity of our Lord commences with these *dawn Masses* from December 16 onward.

From the historical perspective, the *First Plenary Council of the Philippines*, in 1953, applied for a *papal indult* under the following conditions: “*On the nine days preceding the Nativity of our Lord, i.e., from December 16 to 24, the solemn votive Mass Rorate Coeli Desuper* [13] *is sung especially in parish and convent churches, but only once a day with great solemnity and with a big attendance of the faithful*”. [14] With the promulgation of the 1960 Code of Rubrics, the Philippine Hierarchy, under its president Archbishop Julio Rosales of Cebu, wasted no time and decided to elevate in the same year to the Holy Father a suppliant letter “*humbly asking that, in spite of the promulgation of the new Code of Rubrics, and for as long as the same grave reason, namely the conservation of the Faith [in the Philippines] continued, the Aguinaldo Masses be allowed to be sung for nine days preceding the Nativity*”. [15] On 24 March 1961, the petition was granted for a period of five years. Until today, the Philippine Church continues to cling strongly to centuries-old tradition of celebrating the “*Aguinaldo Masses*”, with undiminished attendance and festive joy, for the same reasons adduced in ancient times, but with some changes and trends caused by the changing lifestyle and circumstances in our society. We refer to the time and places of their celebration. Some Masses are now being celebrated in the evening, and not only in churches and chapels, but also in malls and commercial centers.

Regarding the propriety of celebrating the “*Aguinaldo Masses*”, with all its elements, in the evening and even more than once in a parish church due to the great magnitude in number and massive attendance of people, let me share with you the following considerations:

1. In places where the “*Misa de Aguinaldo*” or “*Simbang Gabi*” begins on December 15 and is celebrated in the evening, which formulary are we going to use?

Since “*Misa de Aguinaldo*” or “*Simbang Gabi*” is a form of Filipino popular religiosity or popular devotion expressed not in novena of devotional prayers but in the liturgy, there is no reason why elements (“*Gloria*”, *festive celebration, white vestment, et al.*) of the “*Simbang Gabi*” may not be availed of. In fact, these “*Misas de Aguinaldo*” were tolerated since they were regarded as a popular devotion, not only in preparation for the celebration of the Lord’s nativity, but also in honor of the Blessed Mother.

There is only one restriction though: no anticipation of weekday Masses. For December 15, therefore, the Mass formulary (*prayers and readings*) proper to the day is to be used.

2. Could we anticipate the “*Aguinaldo Masses*” on weekdays?

We do not anticipate any Mass except Masses on Sundays, holy days of obligation, or solemnities which have their own *Vigil Mass* and *Evening Prayer I*. Therefore, Masses on ordinary days or week days are not anticipated. Hence, the formulary to be used for December 15 onward is the formulary (i.e., the texts of the prayers and readings) proper to the day.

3. Does the reason given with regard to the celebration of the “*Aguinaldo Masses*” in the Philippines, that is, for the perseverance of the nation in faith and the preservation of our holy religion in this part of the world, still hold? Is it still valid?

In the affirmative. There is also a school of thought which holds that if these Masses were celebrated at dawn to allow farmers to participate in these Masses before they go to work in the fields, there is no reason why the same could not be applied to people who have to leave their homes early in the morning for work in the offices, schools, etc.

4. Rubrics regarding “*Aguinaldo Masses*” at Dawn:

a. For the Mass formulary, use the Common of the BVM in Advent (“*Rorate Coeli Desuper*”), *Gloria*, *Advent Preface II* [I], *white vestments*.

The *Supplement to the Roman Sacramentary* provides us with the Mass formulary (*liturgical texts*), both the texts of the prayers and the Scriptural readings, for each day of the “*Simbang Gabi*”. It likewise says that, at these Masses, the “*Gloria*” is sung on the 3rd and 4th Sundays of Advent, white vestments are used even on Sunday, the church and sanctuary are festively decorated, and approved musical instruments are played, but only for the “*Aguinaldo Mass*” of that day.

b. The CBCP has also approved to permanently assign to December 16 the *readings* for *Friday* of the *Third Week* of Advent: *Is 56: 1-3, 6-8* and *Jn 5: 33-36*. On the other hand, the *Ordo* says that “in the spirit of the season, one may lawfully use in these Masses the *Weekday Lectionary*” (Roman Missal, General Guidelines 328).

5. Regarding celebrating more than one “*Aguinaldo Mass*” in a parish church especially in highly urbanized places (which do not have any other church or chapels to celebrate the said Mass) due to the magnitude in number of people attending or participating in the Mass which the church building may not be able to accommodate, there is no reason why this may not be allowed. It is to be noted that one of the considerations for the granting (to both Spain and the Philippines) of the indult to celebrate this Mass is the massive and undiminished attendance of people.

6. Christmas *Liturgies in the Absence of a Priest*: One of the impressive expressions of Filipino Catholic faith is the practice of novena Masses in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary (*Misa de Aguinaldo*, *Simbang Gabi*, or *Aguinaldo Masses*) traditionally held at dawn from December 16 to 24. In order not to deprive the faithful who live far away from the parish church of the spiritual benefits derived from the practice of “*Simbang Gabi*”, the CBCP has found it opportune and legitimate to introduce, since 1997, “*Christmas Liturgies in the Absence of a Priest*”, similar to the “*Sunday Assembly in the Absence of a Priest*”. This rite is offered as a guide for the proper observance of such a celebration. It is, however, understood that the norms issued by the Holy See and the local Ordinary on the “*Sunday Assembly in the Absence of a Priest*” apply in this Christmas liturgy with equal force. Likewise, the Philippine Bishops have also granted its seal of approval for the faithful

to sing the "*Gloria*" on the *Third* and *Fourth Sundays* of Advent, but *only* during the "*Simbang Gabi*" Masses and the "*Christmas Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest*".

7. During the "*Simbang Gabi*" Masses and "*Christmas Liturgies in the Absence of a Priest*" may Christmas carols be sung?

In the affirmative, since for Filipinos Christmas begins not at the Midnight Mass of December 24, but at the start of the "*Simbang Gabi*". The Alcina report likewise tells us that even Christmas carols were sung at the "*Misa de Aguinaldo*" in the Visayas and perhaps even in Manila where he had stayed for a total of four years during his ministry in the Philippines.

Prepared by:

FR, VIRGILIO B. HERNANDEZ

Immaculate Conception Parish

Malvar, Batangas

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