

SIMBANG GABI (Sim Bung Ga Bee)

Among Catholic Filipinos, one of the most-beloved and much-awaited religious events are the nine consecutive pre-Christmas dawn Masses known as Simbang Gabi (Night Mass), which traditionally start on December 16. This tradition originated in Mexico when, in 1587, Fray Diego de Soria, prior of the convent of San Agustin Acolman, petitioned the Pope for permission to hold Christmastide Masses outdoors because the church could not accommodate all the people who attended the dawn services. After the request was granted, these Masses came to be known as Misa de Aguinaldo (Mass of the Gift). In the sixteenth century, Pope Sixtus V decreed that these pre-dawn Masses be held in the Philippines starting every December 16. This Novena of Masses expressed the sentiments of the people towards Mary, and the readings, prayers and chants of Simbang Gabi reflected the celebration of the mystery of the Incarnation of the Father's eternal word, the fruit of Mary's womb. These Masses were celebrated in the early morning hours, mainly because most Filipinos at the time were mostly farmers or fishermen who either began or ended their day at dawn.

Simbang Gabi ends on Christmas Eve with Midnight Mass, known as the Misa de Gallo (Mass of the Rooster), after which the families will gather together for a hearty post-midnight meal called Noche Buena. This feast gathers together all members of the family to offer gifts to each other and to pay respect to their elders.

Simbang Gabi has become one of the most popular traditions in the country. But it is not just a tradition that is celebrated because we need to do so. It is a significant moment not only because it strengthens relationships among family members and friends, but also because it is the time where our faith is intensified. This is the time where we mostly feel the presence of the Lord because it is the spiritual preparation for Christmas, the birth of Jesus Christ. The Masses were celebrated early in the morning to signify the darkness, which will be overcome by light. This tradition has been brought to the United States and all over the world where Filipinos live. In the Arlington Diocese, the novena is carried on in its original form at the St Charles Borromeo parish with masses said at 5:00 in the morning from December 16th through December 24th, and followed by a feast in the church hall after all the masses.

Here at the parish of Our Lady of Good Counsel, we also keep this Filipino tradition and it has been going on for the past few years. We do not do the entire 9-day Novena of Masses, but we celebrate and sponsor one Mass usually on the Saturday that falls within the novena of Simbang Gabi in the Arlington Diocese. This is followed by a reception in the Church Hall featuring typical Simbang Gabi fare with assortments of Filipino food and desserts.