



CHANTING THE EXSULTET

Sometimes a truly great event can turn a simple gesture, like lighting a candle at twilight for an evening prayer service, into a great work of ritual art. The simple candle becomes decorated with the symbols of the five wounds of the crucified Savior. The prayer that blesses the candle becomes a three-part work of literary art. Its musical setting is recognized as a masterpiece. This work is what the Sacramentary calls the Easter Proclamation, the *Praeconium Paschale* in Latin. It is more commonly called the *Exsultet*, which means “rejoice,” after the first word of the Latin text.

The *Exsultet* has its roots in the Old Testament rite of the evening sacrifice of praise at twilight. This illumination, especially for the Saturday vigil and for the most solemn vigil of Easter, was considered a symbol of the resurrection of Christ. The light that had to be kindled for the reading from the ambo was singled out for this special blessing. Since the deacon had the responsibility of lighting this candle, he also had the privilege of pronouncing its blessing. This “praise of the candle” is mentioned by St. Jerome in about 378 AD. The Sacramentary tells us that if a deacon is not available, this Easter proclamation may be sung by one who is not a deacon. In this case, the bracketed words “My dearest friends” up to the end of the introduction are omitted, as is the greeting “The Lord be with you.”

The structure of the *Exsultet* consists of three different liturgical forms. The first is a proclamation of good news (a Gospel) addressed to four groups: the heavenly powers, the earth, the universal Church, and the gathered assembly of faithful. The second liturgical form is that of a solemn consecratory preface (“It is truly right...”), like those that introduce the eucharistic prayer and the one that is used for the consecration of the baptismal water. It lists seven reasons for rejoicing, each introduced with the formula “This is the night.” This is followed by seven effects of the night’s celebration on God’s faithful people. The third form is that of a special prayer of blessing for the Easter candle (“Therefore, Heavenly Father...”). It is based on the form used for blessing the light used at vespers, “the evening sacrifice of praise.” In Italy, this solemn proclamation was sung from long strips of parchment that gradually unrolled as the deacon sang. Embedded as background to the text were illuminations that were

seen right-side up by the faithful standing nearby as the deacon unrolled the text over the front of the ambo.

The content has varied over the centuries with additions, subtractions, and rearrangements of the text. The current Sacramentary states that either the long or the short form may be sung and that the conference of bishops may also adapt the text by inserting acclamations for the people. The most notable omission in the current English translation is the reference to this candle as “fed by the melting wax, which the mother bee brought forth to make this precious candle.” In the official Latin version, this text occurs just before the phrase “Let it mingle with the lights of heaven.” This reference to the “work of bees” has been restored in the sung version used at St. Meinrad for the Easter Vigil service. A copy can be obtained at the St. Meinrad Web site: http://www.saintmeinrad.edu/monastery_lit_musicproducts.aspx.

A chant setting of this prose text is really a kind of sung speech that follows the flow of each sense unit and phrase. The musical rhythm is that of the solemnly proclaimed text itself. The first part contains a special musical setting that has its origins in public proclamations of good news, like the birth of an heir to a kingdom or the victory of an army over the enemies of a nation. It needs to be sung in a solemn manner to convey a sense of the magnitude of such news. The second part needs to be sung with careful changes in emotion according to the different reasons given for our rejoicing and the different effects this event is intended to produce in each of us. The third and final section should be sung as a kind of pleading prayer that this assembly may be filled with the blessings of Christ’s resurrection as it offers this special evening sacrifice of praise.

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