All-nighter at 84: Catonsville woman eagerly awaits Easter Vigil

By Erik Zygmont
ezygmont@CatholicReview.org
Twitter @ReviewErik

Rose Marie Hellman, 84, attended her first all-night Holy Saturday Vigil at St. Vincent de Paul in Baltimore five years ago, proving that it's never too late to start a well-loved tradition.

"It's something I never did before, and I like it," she said. "It's a challenge to see if I can stay up all night, and I can."

The vigil starts at 9:30 p.m. on Holy Saturday and concludes with an Easter breakfast at 10:30 a.m. on Easter Sunday. Per the tradition, parishioners gather at a large fire outside of St. Vincent de Paul before proceeding into the church for an all-night celebration of the Liturgy of the Word. At 8:30 a.m., the assembly sings the Gloria, hears the Easter Gospel, baptizes new members and celebrates the Eucharist.

St. Vincent de Paul welcomes all stamina levels to the vigil, with nap breaks available in the church, rectory and choir loft, and refreshments in the undercroft.

Describing his church's open-door policy during the Easter vigil, Father Richard Lawrence refers to the writings of Egeria, a fourth-century Galician pilgrim who traveled to Jerusalem and observed vigil proceedings at the site identified as Christ's tomb.

"The young and the strong keep vigil at the tomb all night long," Father Lawrence said, paraphrasing Egeria. "The rest do what they can."

"At St. Vincent, everybody participates to the extent of their ability," he explained, "which depends on your age, your health, whether you have kids, and so on."

Old Testament readings are featured throughout the night. Father Lawrence opens the floor to parishioners, who lead the assembly in song, prayer, or performances corresponding to the readings.

"No one should have to listen to my ramblings every hour," Father Lawrence said, though Hellman called him an "outstanding homilist."

Hellman usually brings a book.

"This year it's C.S. Lewis's 'The Screwtape Letters,'" she said. "It's about a little devil that tries to get you."

All-night Holy Saturday Vigils are rare, and Father Lawrence said that he knows of only one other church in the U.S. that holds one.
Hellman says that there is no need to prepare for the long night.
“You just come,” she said.
Hellman is a Catonsville resident but she became a parishioner at St. Vincent de Paul after attending her grandson’s confirmation there one Easter. She felt at home at the church, located at 120 N. Front St.
“It’s the most warm and loving community that I’ve been a part of,” she said. “Normally nobody talks to you after church; the Mass is enough. Here I make friends. People greet you, [and] there are lots of activities.”
“We’re not terribly sane, but we’re reasonably friendly,” Father Lawrence said.
When not at St. Vincent de Paul, Hellman is out visiting friends or meeting with her stamp club in Washington, D.C.

Her friends call her “Roaming Rose Marie.”

“I just keep going,” she said.
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