

# Simbang Gabi: A Brief Explanation of the Filipino Christmas Tradition

*Simbang Gabi* is a Filipino Christmas tradition. It is a series of nine dawn masses. The mass starts as early as 4:00 a.m. It begins on December 16 and ends on the midnight of the 24th of December, which is the midnight mass. This tradition was introduced by the Spanish friars to allow the farmers to hear mass before going to the fields early in the morning. *Simbang Gabi* is also known by its popular Spanish name as the *Misa de Gallo*, or "Mass of the Rooster."

In the olden days, the church bells start ringing as early as three o'clock, waking people up so they can get ready for the four o'clock dawn mass.

The Roman Catholic churches across the nation start to open their doors shortly before the break of dawn to welcome the faithfuls to the *Simbang Gabi* mass.

Today, the tradition of *Simbang Gabi* continues whether you live in the city or in the province, although it is celebrated in new ways. Most churches are decorated with colorful lights and beautiful parol lanterns to welcome the church goers.

The Nativity Scene or *Belen* is displayed in preparation for the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. It shows baby Jesus in a manger with Mother Mary and Saint Joseph. There are shepherds and farm animals. A complete scenario of the *Belen* includes the three wise men carrying their gifts to Infant Jesus and the star of Bethlehem that guided them in their journey.

Shortly after the mass, traditional delicacies awaits the church goers, there are food stalls right outside the church, popular favourites are *bibingka*, *puto* (rice cakes), *puto bungbong*, *suman sa pasko*, *suman sa ibos*, and usually served with tea or coffee. *Hot pandesal* (breakfast rolls) are also very popular.

*Simbang Gabi* is not just a tradition that is celebrated because we need to do so. But it is also the spiritual preparation for Christmas, in commemorating the birth of Jesus Christ. The celebration is also seen as a way of requesting blessings from the Lord, as most people believe that if one completes the whole series of nine dawn masses, wishes will be granted.

Over the years, Filipinos communities have made some changes in the way that this event is celebrated. Some urban parishes now celebrates *Misa de Gallo* around 8- 9 in the evening in order to accommodate the needs of the members of the community who have different work schedules.

*Simbang Gabi* is also recognized by Catholic Filipino communities who are living elsewhere in the world. No matter how or when this celebration takes place, *Simbang Gabi* provides a strong indication of the depth of Catholicism among the Filipino people.