

## Simbang Gabi

### Learn about the spiritual Filipino Christmas tradition



In 2002, Lourdes Ruta wanted to bring a piece of the Philippines to Milwaukee. As the coordinator of the Simbang Gabi Ministry, Ruta, with the help of the Filipino community and Filipino Catholic Ministry, was able to do just that by hosting the first Simbang Gabi celebration at nine different parishes around Milwaukee. This year, the seventh annual Simbang Gabi services will be held in Milwaukee. To understand the importance and meaning this event holds for Milwaukee's Filipino community and others who have come to cherish it, the history of Simbang Gabi must first be known.

Simbang Gabi dates back to 1587 when Fray Diego Soria, prior of the convent of San Agustin Acolman in Mexico, asked the Pope for permission to hold Posadas (a nine-day commemoration of Mary and Joseph's search for an inn to birth Jesus) outdoors because the church was not large enough to accommodate the many faithful wishing to attend. Though his request was granted, it was not until the 17th century that the nine-day religious celebration was introduced to the Philippines by missionaries and became a Filipino spiritual tradition.

In the 17th century, many Filipinos were fishermen or farmers who rose or ended their days with the dawn. To avoid the intense heat of mid-day, other laborers also began adhering to a schedule which began with the rooster's call at crack of dawn. Due to the work schedules of the Filipino people, missionaries realized the best time to gather people together was at dawn. It was then that the missionaries introduced the devotion to the Virgin Mary, which takes place the nine days leading up to Christmas, to the Philippines. Since Mass began as early as 4:00 a.m. during these nine days, the Masses became known as the Misa de Gallo, Spanish for Mass of the rooster. Other names associated with these Masses are Misa de Aguinaldo, Spanish for Mass of the gift, or the Simbang Gabi, Filipino for night Mass.

Over the years, Simbang Gabi became a religious celebration infused with Filipino customs and food. Celebrated as a novena, nine successive days of devotion and prayer, it began on Dec. 16 and ended on Dec. 24. The Masses, which also signified the anticipation of Christ's coming, started at dawn with church bells or Christmas carols announcing the impending services. Since it was typically dark when the churchgoers walked to Mass, people hung parols, colorful star-like lanterns made of paper and bamboo to represent the Star of Bethlehem, in their windows. Others set up belens, nativity scenes to commemorate the journey that ended with Jesus' birth in a manger.

Once at Mass, the parishioners celebrated the liturgy with special readings, prayers, chants and panuluyan, a re-enactment of Mary and Joseph trying to find an inn for the birth of Jesus. After Mass, more festivities ensued with traditional food and drink. Delicacies such as bibingka (rice, flour and egg-based cake), puto (rice cakes), puto bungbong (steamed, purple sticky rice), sumansa pasko, suman sa ibos, hot pandesal (breakfast roll), salabat (hot ginger tea), tsokolate (hot cocoa) and coffee were set out for all to enjoy.

In traditional communities of the Philippines, Simbang Gabi has not been altered. In certain areas, however, the Mass times have been changed to accommodate the schedules of a new generation. This is also true of celebrations in the United States. Though Filipinos brought the tradition of Simbang Gabi with them, the celebrations have been slightly modified to fit in with the schedules of modern daily life in the United States.

The Milwaukee Filipino Catholic Ministry's Simbang Gabi celebrations are no exception. The dawn Masses have been replaced with nine evening services. The Masses are held at a different parish each night allowing the tradition to reach as many people as possible. However, some customs such as the parol, belen and panuluyan have been retained. After Mass, traditional Filipino dishes are still served. Though the festivities have been slightly altered, the intent is still the same. Filipinos and non-Filipinos alike gather in Churches around the city to experience a piece of the past, but more importantly, to mentally and spiritually prepare for the celebration of the birth of our Lord. Ruta, who is now the chairperson of the Filipino Catholic Ministry of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, has said "It is our prayer and mission that the Simbang Gabi tradition will continue to be an avenue for outreach to all Filipino Catholics in the Archdiocese."

If you would like to join the Simbang Gabi celebration, follow this link [Simbang Gabi Schedule](#) to find Mass times and locations.

**Maligayang Pasko At Manigong Bagong Taon!  
Merry Christmas & Happy New Year to All!**

*Article by Gillian Lester-George  
Photo submitted by Sam Lucero*

