News



Bishop Honesto Ongtioco of Cubao, Philippines, celebrates the first of the nine-day dawn Mass known as “Misa de Gallo,” ahead of Christmas, at the Immaculate Conception Cathedral of Cubao in Manila Dec.16, 2024. (OSV News/Lisa Marie David, Reuters)

Simone Orendain

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In the nine days before Christmas, the predominantly Catholic Philippines begins its traditional novena of daily dawn Masses in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary prior to the birth of her son Jesus Christ.

Closer to home in the United States, the Masses, called "Simbang Gabi" or "Night Mass," are mostly on an evening anticipatory schedule. Filipino-Americans have brought the tradition to their adopted homeland and added some multicultural flair to their celebrations.

Dioceses around the country typically hold evening Masses from Dec. 16 through Dec. 24, with churches decorated with "parols" or colorful thin paper lanterns in the shape of a star symbolizing the star of Bethlehem.

Other popular dates are from the 15th through the 23rd, leaving the 24th fully dedicated to Christmas Eve. Some individual parishes may choose to schedule 4 and 5 a.m. Masses throughout the nine days.

The early morning Mass called "Misa de Gallo" ("Rooster's Mass") keeps the original schedule in which, historically, Filipino farmers, before working the land, would go to the novena Mass and afterward have light snacks at home, usually of traditional rice, cassava and coconut-based sweets, according to Divine Word Father Adam MacDonald.

The Chicago-based priest is in high demand at this time of year, with four Masses on his schedule this year. He told OSV News he has been celebrating Simbang Gabi Mass yearly both in the U.S. and the Philippines since his ordination in 2000.

"What we came to discover ... is that the communities that I've served in here, generally in the Chicago area and a few other places I could mention, they are of the desire and of the inclination to make these parish-wide celebrations where it's not

limited to being in a Filipino heritage," said MacDonald.

"And so when I look out upon the faces in the crowd from the privileged place that I stand or sit in the sanctuary, I see a lot of white faces, black faces, brown, yellow, and other, and it occurs to me automatically, if this Mass was all in Filipino, it probably would not appeal to a wide cross-section of God's people."

The missionary father was assigned to the Philippines for his first four years in the priesthood, quickly learned the national language, Tagalog, and became very popular with Filipino-Americans once he returned to the U.S.

MacDonald, 54, said the Masses are predominantly in English, sometimes with a reading or two in Tagalog or another dialect of the Philippines and some Tagalog hymns. But his homilies are a mix of English and Tagalog and he translates the Tagalog parts.

He and other Simbang Gabi organizers around the country told OSV News that oftentimes homilies are done only in English. After the Mass, usually in a church hall, MacDonald said, huge meals of roasted pig and typical Filipino party dishes are shared, sometimes along with cultural performances.

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Clarissa Martinez organized Simbang Gabi Masses at several parishes for 18 years in the Los Angeles Archdiocese, until last year. In 2023, she attended Simbang Gabi Mass from the pews — a first in a very long while — after moving to San Diego to work at the diocese there.

Martinez, 43, told OSV News, "The good part about it is that when we enter into the novena of Masses, in the nine days, it falls right into the third Sunday of Advent — which is where we're really focusing a lot and centering our hearts into the anticipation with joy of the coming of Christ. And so, that kind of takes the tone as well into the liturgies appropriately."

Martinez pointed out that in the Philippines, it is the period in Advent in which parishes receive special dispensation to sing the Gloria and have presiders wear white.

She is also part of an advisory committee to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Island Affairs. In that capacity, Martinez said that she has seen Simbang Gabi becoming more and more widely accepted and part of the mainstream calendar of liturgical events in the past 10 years.

The Archdiocese of Chicago lists 55 parishes that will celebrate Simbang Gabi Masses this year and a spokeswoman told OSV News that the Filipino tradition is "as strong as ever."

In the Richmond Diocese, the Office of Ethnic Ministries confirmed to OSV News that over 32 Simbang Gabi's Masses are on the schedule, making this the highest number of such Masses there.

And they take significant planning and coordination, according to Luz Rayel-Straub, a volunteer on the Richmond Diocese ethnic ministry advisory board. She has had the demanding task of juggling schedules of Filipino, foreign and American priests for the past five years, starting as early as the day after Labor Day.

Still, Rayel-Straub told OSV News she was grateful for her role.

"Simbang Gabi is a means of gratitude and generosity (for) all the blessings we receive during the entire year, the bounty of harvest the farmers had back in the Philippines that was originally why they (still) do it at dawn," she said. "So we try to express and share this uniqueness of our faith as a means of evangelization with the Americans."