

## Simbang Gabi 2025 “Which Star to Follow”

Bishop Frank Schuster

In recent years there has been a growth in social media of so-called influencers. Do you know what I am referring to? They are on-line celebrities that have hundreds of millions of followers. That is why I guess they are called “influencers”. They have very large audiences to get their message out. For example, celebrities like Taylor Swift and Justin Bieber have over a half billion followers each. Imagine that. And they are not even remotely alone. There are dozens and dozens of influencers with hundreds of millions of followers. And these influencers do in fact influence culture, particularly our young people. Some influencers tell us what to eat, some tell us what to wear, what to listen to or watch, who to vote for, the list goes on. I thought Pope Leo would have a similar audience on-line. He is not even close to those on top of the list. Admittedly, posts along the lines of “Go to Church, Say your Prayers, Be Generous to the Poor” probably aren’t going to be as flashy as what Beyonce or Lady Gaga might post. However, what Pope Leo has to share is nevertheless far more helpful. Everyone should be listening to him. Like St. John the Baptist, Pope Leo’s power isn’t about drawing attention to himself. He always points us to Jesus. And yet, people evidently are more interested with what Justin Bieber has to say. I have nothing against Justin Bieber. It is just that, this whole influencer phenomenon is very strange to me.

You see, it is amazing to me how society is wrapped up in star worship, isn’t it? Like I just said, I have nothing against celebrities, however, have you thought about how from all we see on TV, the movie theater, X, or in real life, like at a football game, our society is wrapped up in all kinds of hero worship, aren’t we? Star worship. People following stars, so many people seeking something from other people they worship and adore.

Today we celebrate the launch of Simbang Gabi, and the witness of a courageously faithful people who in one of the hardest chapters of their history looked to a different star. Didn’t they? For the benefit of our younger people and for those who are here who may not know about the origin of Simbang Gabi, this Novena began because during the Spanish Occupation when the Filipino people were often forced to work long days of manual labor. They were not allowed to go to Mass during the day because their occupiers wanted to maximize their labor while the sun was still out. The only way that they could go to Mass was by asking the Church permission to have Mass in the middle of the night, very early in the morning before it was light out, so the workers could attend mass when they were most rested. The Church, of course, obliged. As you know, this mass was also called the Misa de Gallo, as it was celebrated when the roosters started to crow. Thank you for scheduling this mass at 11 AM.

However, imagine if you will if we were here in the middle of the night, The parols this morning would offer and even more powerful witness. Their origin of course comes from a mixture of faith and practicality. Just as a star led the Magi to Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus, these beautiful lamps also lit the workers way to the Holy Mass. It was a dark time for the Filipino people. The light of faith guided them through.

Speaking of which, the Philippines is going through a very difficult chapter right now. As you know, the recent typhoons have devastated several regions in the Philippines. Hundreds have died and over a million are displaced. Even though we seem far away here in Seattle, we aren't, as many here have family back home. Please let your families back home know that here in the Archdiocese of Seattle we are spiritually close to them and, even as we deal with the aftermath of our own flooding, we keep them in our prayers. How can we be a light in the darkness right now? A good place to start is by supporting Catholic Relief Services for their work in the Philippines and Catholic Community Services here in Western Washington. That is one very helpful way you and I can be a light in the darkness right now.

However, we are also dealing with the greater darkness of our nation's latest policy on immigration. In case you are wondering, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops stand with our immigrants. We stand with our multicultural communities. We stand with you. It should be common sense that undocumented immigrants and migrants should not be all lumped in the same basket. The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, Article Ten, says, "Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him." In my mind, the way our country is going about deportations right now with how our ICE raids are being conducted violates the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. We pray for all who are affected by our countries immigration policies when they run afoul. Every situation of course is different. In a special way, I would like to lift up in prayer a man many of you might know, Greggory Sorio. He has a green card, and the situation is complicated. The important thing here is that he is dealing with serious medical issues. His health team is here and his family is here. I pray that through the intercession of St. Lucy whose feast day is today, that God watch over Greggory and his family. May the Holy Spirit shine a light as they navigate our justice system. And may Greggory and his family be treated fairly and with dignity.

Yes, because we all sometimes live in days that grow dark, the deep symbolism and witness of the parols inspires me. They inspire us all. The parols that lit the field workers' path the morning mass before another hard day of working in the fields in a time of persecution says one thing loud and clear: celebrating Christmas this year or any year makes absolutely no sense without our Easter hope. We do not celebrate Jesus' birth because he was a great thinker, or historical figure. We worship him and we long for him at Christmas morning because Jesus is our savior. He is the light of the world. He is the brightest star in the night. Jesus is ultimately the only influencer worth following. Amen?

Bringing this all home, at this moment during Advent, we can ask ourselves the deeper spiritual question, what star are we following as we make our pilgrim journey through life? What star are we following, really? And, as we all know, there are millions of stars to pick from. Some of them lead to Jesus. Some of them will lead us to the evil one. Some lead us nowhere. What star are we following in our personal lives right now. The witness of Simbang Gabi offers us a very, very strong suggestion: pick a good star to follow. Pick a star that leads you someplace. Pick a star that leads you to Jesus.