

## **Cherishing a Christmas Eve Tradition**

In preparation for the Nativity of our Lord, Ukrainian, Ruthenian, Polish, Lithuanian, Slovak and other families of Eastern European descent gather together on Christmas Eve for “The Holy Supper.” In days gone by, Christmas Eve Holy Supper customs and traditions varied from country to country, village to village. Ukrainians call this Christmas Eve celebration *Sviatyi Vecher*. The Polish call it *Wigilia*, the Ruthenians call it *Svjatyj Vecer*. Whatever the name, whatever the customs, all share some common characteristics, among them an association with an agricultural and pastoral way of life.

Today our challenge is to make *Sviatyi Vecher* meaningful in a more urban environment and in families where perhaps only the Mother or the Father are of Eastern European descent. No matter what our family composition, we can still maintain important elements of *Sviatyi Vecher*, which offers us one of the best opportunities to celebrate the life of the Church in our families and homes.

Prayer and the 40-day Philipian fast precede the Christmas Eve Holy Supper. During this time we are encouraged not only to fast but also to prepare quietly for the coming of Christ--not an easy thing to do in our American culture, which begins the Christmas season on the day after Thanksgiving! Perhaps we cannot avoid all holiday parties or the singing of Christmas carols, but as a family we might discuss ways of minimizing them. As Christmas Eve draws near, we clean and decorate the house, we shop, and we prepare special foods. Finally, the big day arrives. The children search the skies for the “first star” of the evening--when they have found the star, they joyously announce the fact to all and the celebration begins.

In our Ukrainian tradition, the Christmas Eve table is covered with a white tablecloth in memory of the swaddling clothes of Christ. Hay is placed on the table (well, technically it's supposed to be placed under the tablecloth, which never worked at our house – too many spills). Straw is sprinkled on the floor--both hay and straw remind us of the poverty of the cave in which Jesus was born. Bread, three-tiered and braided, is the centerpiece of the table, symbolizing Christ, the Bread of Life. A candle in the center of the bread recalls the Star of Bethlehem, which led men to worship the true Light of the World. A *didukh*, a sheaf of wheat symbolizing all of the ancestors who have come before us as well as the next harvest, is placed in a corner by the dining table. An empty seat is reserved for the unexpected guest, perhaps Jesus Himself. A lighted candle is often placed in a window to welcome all.

After praying together before the icon of the Nativity, *kutya*, a mixture of boiled wheat, honey and poppyseed is served. Then garlic (symbolizing the bitterness of life) and honey (symbolizing the sweetness of life) are shared by all. This is followed by a 12-course meal, meatless and containing no dairy products. The 12 dishes remind us of the 12 apostles or the 12 months of the year, depending on which authority you consult. (As an interesting side note, other Eastern European cultures serve only odd numbered dishes). The dishes include *kutya*, *borscht* with *vuschky*, fish dishes, *varenky*, meatless *holubtsi*, mushroom gravy and fruit compote. You can find Holy Supper menus and

recipes and bits of folklore in any number of Ukrainian cookbooks. An excellent source is *Ukrainian Christmas*, compiled by Mary Ann Woloch Vaughn, a member of St. Josaphat Parish in Munster, Indiana.

The decision all households must make is how authentic does the supper have to be. Each family must decide how it is going to celebrate Sviatyi Vecher, just as each family and village did centuries ago. If we have non-Ukrainian members in our family, can we include a dish from that member's ancestral or American culture? Some families might serve a mushroom or sauerkraut soup instead of borsch. Some families might skip a particular dish because of the family's eating preferences. But the important thing is to prepare and serve the Holy Supper, in anticipation of the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

After dinner, the entire family joins in the singing of Christmas carols. Then gifts are exchanged. In the old days, children were satisfied with fruits and nuts, hidden in the straw. Today it is i-Pods, computers and electronic games!

No matter how busy you are, please take time to celebrate Sviatyi Vecher. Even if you can only do the bare minimum as far as cooking goes, encourage the family to reflect on the true meaning of the Holy Supper. Be sure that each family member has a role in this most loved and esteemed celebration. It teaches us to connect with our ancestors, our history and culture as the birth of Jesus Christ is celebrated. With some planning and flexibility you can give your children Christmas memories they will forever cherish.

A blessed Christmas to all!

**Христос Рождается!**