

## Blessing Paschal Food--a Custom worth Keeping

Prior to celebrating the Feast of Feasts, Pascha--the Resurrection of our Lord God and Savior, Jesus Christ--our domestic church is a beehive of activity! What excitement precedes the weeks before Easter--writing pysanky; cleaning our house; cleansing our souls with Confession; spending time in prayer, sacrifice and attendance at the Liturgy of the Pre-Sanctified Gifts; bringing home pussy willows on Flowery (Palm) Sunday and preparing Paschal foods for blessing.

The entire family can participate in these preparations, reflecting on the significance of what all this activity represents. It is easy to focus on the *doing*—especially when preparing the Paschal foods. We know *what* to cook, *how* to arrange the foods, but perhaps don't spend much time thinking about what it *means* to have these foods blessed. When we go to the church for the blessing, there are so many people, so much excitement; we hardly hear the words the priest prays. Let's stop for a moment to reflect on why we prepare an Easter basket and what blessing Paschal food really means! Although we say "Blessing our Easter basket," we are rightly reminded that we do not bless the basket, but the food in it. This old and important custom is one of our most beloved religious and cultural traditions. Although today our fast laws have been relaxed, meat and dairy products were once totally excluded during the entire forty days of the Great Fast. As the fast ends, we show our joy and gratitude to God by blessing many of the foods from which we have abstained. On this feast of new spiritual life, we bless food that sustains physical life!

We bless Paska (bread); meat; dairy products; pysanky; hard-cooked eggs; horseradish, and salt. They are placed in a basket often used exclusively for this purpose. The foods are covered with a cloth embroidered with "Christ Is Risen! Indeed He is Risen!" (*Chrystos Voskres! Voistynu Voskres*). A candle is placed in the basket and lighted during the blessing.

After the Tropar of the day, the priest prays: "O Holy Master, Father almighty, pre-eternal God: be pleased to sanctify this bread by Your holy and spiritual blessing, so that it might be unto salvation of souls as well as bodily health for all who eat of it. May it also protect against all illness and every attack of the enemy."

The bread--Paska--is made of white flour, milk, eggs, sugar and perhaps raisins. The top of the loaf is decorated with dough designs. The pride of every household at Easter is the texture of the Paska! (We often sample each other's Paska, even if we purchased it from the bakery.) Paska symbolizes Christ, the living Bread, who came to give eternal life to the world in Holy Eucharist.

Meat products are blessed next. Lamb symbolizes the sacrificial animals of the Old Testament, foreshadowing the true sacrifice of our Savior, who became for us "a Lamb of God, taking away the sins of the world." The meats also signify the fatted calf prepared for the prodigal son on his return to his father's house. The priest prays, "O Lord Jesus Christ our God, look upon these various meats... sanctify them as You sanctified the ram, which Abraham, the faithful one, brought to You...so that just as he was made worthy to enjoy Your goodness, we too might delight in these foods that You have hallowed and blessed to nourish us all." Ham, sausage and bacon show our freedom from Old Testament restrictions of "clean" or "unclean" foods. Through Christ, we are free to eat whatever we wish, enjoying the fullness of God's creation.

The priest then blesses cheese, eggs and other dairy products. He prays: “ O Master, Lord our God, Creator and Builder of all things: bless these milk products along with these eggs, and preserve us in Your goodness, so that partaking of them we may be filled with Your gifts, which You, because of Your unspeakable goodness, bestow on us so ungrudgingly.” Butter, sometimes shaped as a lamb, represents the Lamb of God offered on the altar of the Cross for the life of the world. Dairy products remind us of the peace and prosperity of the Messianic Age foretold by the Prophets.

During Great Lent, we make decorative pysanky. These eggs were made even before the birth of Christ. After the conversion of Ukraine and other Eastern European countries to Christianity, pysanky symbols became equated with religious beliefs, defined now to depict the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. With a stylus we write on and dip raw eggs in non-edible dyes. If pysanky are to be preserved, their contents are dried or removed. Eggs to be eaten are hard-cooked and colored with edible dyes. Eggs are a symbol of resurrection and the emergence of new life. At Easter, our Savior came forth from the tomb just as a chick comes forth after breaking the shell at its hatching.

Salt and horseradish are also blessed. Salt symbolizes the Truth of the message of Christ. Just as salt preserves food, the teachings of Christ preserve our eternal life. Horseradish, whether plain or grated with beets, reminds us of the bitter drink given to Christ on the Cross.

Sometimes children include chocolates and candies in the family Easter basket---or carry their own baskets to the church, to share the joy of the Resurrection in a special way!

Although in many larger parishes, Paschal food is blessed at various times, the traditional time is late Holy Saturday or early Sunday, depending on when Resurrection Matins and Divine Liturgy are celebrated.

After Paschal services, the blessed food is brought home for the family’s Easter meals. A freshly ironed embroidered cloth (*rushnyk*) frames the Resurrection Icon in the icon corner. The candle from the Easter basket may be placed on the table, representing Jesus, the true light. Before eating, all joyfully sing three times: “Christ Is Risen from the dead, trampling death by death, and to those in the tombs, giving life.” A blessed egg is divided into pieces. The father shares it with each family member--dramatizing their oneness with our Lord and each other, in a community of faith and love. Then the rest of the food is enjoyed.

How can any of us ever forget the beautiful smells of Pascha--burning wax used for pysanky; ham; sausage; freshly baked Paska? Even in this busy world we live in, it is not too difficult to prepare a Paschal basket. We might even consider preparing, blessing and delivering baskets to homebound and shut-in parishioners. If we involve our children and grandchildren in these activities, what a vivid memory of Pascha they will have! Keeping the custom of blessing Paschal food will provide them with a lifetime of memories!

**Christ Is Risen! Khrystos Voskres!**