

A Beautiful Tradition

Blessing of Paschal Baskets



In most Eastern European Orthodox families Easter is the biggest holiday of the year. It is bigger and more important than New Year's, birthdays and even Christmas. A central tradition on this holy day, is the Easter basket. The whole family gets together all throughout Lent to prepare the celebration of the Resurrection of Christ. There are tons of baking, embroidery and decorating of pysanky (Easter Eggs). The blessing of the Easter Basket is a prominent tradition. The tradition is practiced in countries like Ukraine, Romania, Poland, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Russia and among Carpathian, Rusyn and Slavic people wherever they may live. The tradition has spread in Orthodox churches in the United States, and is practiced at St. Andrew by many.

If you haven't done this and would like to do it this year, the following will help you get started.

Everything in the basket must be NEW each year. Also, nothing from the Basket may be thrown out, as it is blessed. After everything is eaten, the crumbs are collected and burned or buried in the ground.

The basket is wicker and lined with a bread cloth that can be embroidered or woven in bright colors.

The traditional foods that are commonly included in the basket vary by region. It is not necessary to include every item, nor are Pascha baskets restricted to the items listed. The general rule is to place in the basket foods from which one has abstained during the recent Great Lent and Holy Week.

While traditions vary by region and family, the basket usually contains certain items: butter, bread, pysanky (decorated) eggs, sausage, ham and/or lamb, smoked meats, cheese, salt, and cake.

Foods and other items commonly placed in the baskets include:

LINEN CLOTH: A linen cloth cover, normally quite intricately embroidered with various Resurrection themes and symbols of Christ, or simply an intricate multicolored border and the words "CHRISTOS VOSKRESE" or "CHRIST IS RISEN," is placed over the food when it is brought to the church. People adopting the tradition in countries like the United States, may not have the elaborately decorated linen—having a more plain cover, but they can still enjoy the tradition of the basket!

CANDLE: A decorated candle is placed in the basket, and in some places the candles are lit at the time of the basket blessing.

PASCHA: Pascha and Kulich normally refer to the same thing. However, there are ethnic groups where Pascha and Kulich are quite different foods. In fact, among those groups, the Pascha is bread and the Kulich is Sirets or Hrutka (cheese). Here, it will be used to refer to bread, a sweet yeast bread rich in eggs, butter and other condiments. This bread is symbolic of Christ Himself, He Who is our Bread of life. It is usually baked as a round loaf with a golden crust decorated with some symbol indicative of Christ, such as a braided cross, a lamb or something similar. Sometimes a cross of dough is placed on top, and the entire loaf rimmed with a braided plait of dough giving it a crowned effect. Sometimes the abbreviation XB is used (in Cyrillic writing - XB does NOT equal "ex bee" but "cha veh," the initials for "Christos Voskrese!" - "Christ is Risen!").

HAM (Shoon'-ka): The flesh meat popular among Slavs as the main dish for several reasons: a) the richness of its meat is symbolic of the great joy and abundance of Easter and b) of the richness of the joy in Christ we ought to have, and c) our freedom from the Old Law, now that all things have been made clean in Christ (as indicated to the apostle Saint Peter in the dream on the rooftop at Joppa

[Acts 10:9-16]). Being freed from the Old Law and from the curse of death, which is the wage of sin, all things are now permissible to eat - and ham, the most forbidden of all the "unclean" foods is now symbolic of our total redemption. Many of the faithful will include meats like roasted veal, roast beef, and other foods prepared well ahead of time - foods which can be enjoyed without a lot of last-minute preparation. Those who have been preparing all week are already exhausted, but, being filled with joy at Our Lord's Resurrection from the dead, are looking forward to sitting down to a celebratory feast.

BUTTER (Mas'-lo): The butter is usually shaped into a figure of a lamb or of a three-barred cross and decorated in much the same fashion as the sirets (cheese) above. Butter is to remind us of the goodness of Christ that we are to demonstrate to all men by our lives in Him.

SAUSAGE (Kohl-ba'-ssi): A spicy, garlicky sausage of pork, veal, beef and other products. This is indicative of God's favor and generosity to us sinners.

BACON (Sla-ni'-na): A piece of uncooked bacon cured with spices. This symbolizes of the lavishness and overabundance of God's mercy toward sinners.

SALT (Sol): A condiment necessary for flavor reminding Christians of our duties toward others to "flavor" the world.

PYSANKA (Py-san'-ky): These are highly decorated eggs with symbols and markings made with colored dyes and beeswax. Covered with extremely complicated and intricate designs, some of these eggs take a full week to complete. The word "pysanky" derives from the verb "pysat'," meaning "to write." A pysanka, then, is an egg which has been written (drawn) upon. Eggs represent the new life and Resurrection. Some families have their own patterns passed down from generation to generation. Pysanky are often given as treasured gifts to loved ones on Easter Sunday and in some countries Easter Monday. The egg is presented saying "for your table".

BOILED EGGS: These Eggs are dyed bright red. They are a reminder of the Blood of Christ and the new life that came from it.

CHEESE (Hrudka or Sirets, pronounced - hrood-ka or si-rets): A custard-type cheese shaped into a ball having a rather bland but sweet taste indicative of the moderation that Christians should have in all things. Also, creamed cheese is placed in a small dish and both are decorated with symbols made of cloves or pepper balls.

HORSERADISH (Hrin): Horseradish is commonly mixed with grated red beets to give this a rich, blood red hue. This is symbolic of the bitterness of Christ's Passion which is still in the minds of the faithful, but which is now sweetened with some sugar because of the Resurrection. A bittersweet red-colored mixture which reminds us of the blood and suffering of Christ, at which great price has purchased the astonishing gift of our Redemption

WINE: To symbolize the Blood of Christ.

FLOWERS: To symbolize the beauty of new life and the beauty that God has provided. Often the flowers will decorate the basket itself.

CHOCOLATES, SMALL TRINKETS, OR EMBROIDERY: These items are generally put in by children or families with children. Sometimes small Easter gifts are put in the basket to be blessed before they are given out.

THE BLESSING: For the Blessing, at St. Andrew we place the baskets up around the shrine of St. Andrew before Pascha service begins. At the completion of the service, Holy Water is sprinkled over all the baskets and they are blessed by the priest.