

CHRISTMAS EVE HOLY SUPPER

Many Christian cultures have special, ritualized meals to mark major feasts on the Church calendar. The Christmas Eve Holy Supper (*Svjatjy Večer* or *Velija*) as practiced by Poles, Slovaks, Ukrainians, Rusyns and Lithuanians, may be the most elaborate of all. Just about every detail of the seven- or twelve-course meal is rich in symbolism.

But Slavs aren't the only people with special Christmas foods. Although the menu varies from region to region, the Italian *vigilia di Natale* is also rich in religious symbols. Our parish family includes people of many backgrounds and the Good News of Jesus Christ's birth can be expressed in the symbols of any culture.

Here are a few ideas for using the occasion of your Christmas meal to bring home the message of the Incarnation, to share the Good News and to make sure God has a place at your table. Many of these customs are inspired by the Holy Supper as celebrated in Slav homes for centuries. Others come from ancient Slav folklore.



1. THE TABLE: A **white tablecloth** recalls the swaddling bands in which the newborn Christ was wrapped. **Straw** sprinkled on the table for decoration recalls the manger in which He lay (Luke 2,7). A **single candle** recalls Christ—the light of revelation to the nations (Luke 2,32) and the light of the world (John 9,5). *In Slav folklore there are superstitions about blowing out the candle at the end of the meal and predicting the future year from how the smoke behaves.*

2. THE STAR: Send the children out to look for **the first evening star**. This recalls the star that led the Magi to Christ (Matthew 2,1-11).

3. WASHING: Of course you wash your hands before eating! But tonight, washing with an ewer and basin could be a Christlike act of service to others (John 13,2-17) and a reminder of our Baptism, by which we are united to the newborn Christ (Galatians 3,27). *It is a folk custom to wash with a silver coin in the water; silver was believed to have purifying powers.*

4. A PLACE AT THE TABLE: Set an extra place at the table for the unexpected guest or for the Christ Child Himself. If you have pets, tonight it is appropriate to set a place for them too (on the floor, of course!) and share a little of each course, since it was animals

who were companions to the newborn Christ in the manger (Isaiah 1,3). In warmer climates, the front door might even be left open signifying that there is “room” for Christ here, even if there was no room at the inn (Luke 2,7). The Irish express this welcome with a single candle placed in the window of the family home.

5. PRAYER: The meal should begin by singing the Christmas Troparion. The head of the house should greet everyone: “Christ is born!” to which the response is “Glorify Him!”

6. TOASTS: It is appropriate to offer three: for the deceased, for those present, and the absent.

7. BREAKING BREAD: A special loaf of bread should be prominent on the table. Different cultures have different Christmas breads—prosfora, oplatek, Oblaten, kračun, poplanik, opalyanok, even panettone! —but everyone at the table should partake from the single loaf. Prayers and good wishes can be shared along with the bread as it is broken and passed. Bread always reminds us of Christ, the Bread of Life (John 6,35) but tonight we are also reminded that Jesus was born in Bethlehem (Matthew 2,5-6), which in Hebrew means “House of Bread.” Many families insist on breaking, rather than cutting, the bread. Since we are celebrating the birth of the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6), a knife seems out of place.

8. THE MENU: Christmas Eve is at least a day of abstinence. No meat should be eaten and many people also abstain from dairy. Fish, vegetables, fruits, nuts and grains are the traditional foods for Christmas Eve.

Numbers: There should be **seven** (for the Sacraments) or **twelve** (for the Apostles) courses. Make it a game in the course of the meal: Can anyone at the table name all seven Sacraments? (Baptism, Chrismation, Holy Eucharist, Penance, Matrimony, Holy Orders, Anointing of the Sick just in case you need a hint.) All twelve Apostles? (Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Matthew, James, Jude, Simon, Matthias [replacing Judas]). Serve something in **threes** (a trio of desserts?) to recall the Three Magi (Caspar, Melchior, Balthesar) or in **fours** for the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John). It’s better than talking sports trivia or arguing about politics!



A traditional Velija would include foods like these:

Garlic and honey: *Dip a sliver of garlic in the honey and eat as is or on a piece of bread. (Traditionally, the head of the house anointed each member of the family with the honey just as a priest would anoint with oil in Church. In Slav folklore, this is supposed to insure good health. People gave it a spiritual interpretation too: it represents the bitter and sweet aspects of life.)*

Bobal'ky or kutya; What do Ukrainian *kutya*, Slovak *bobal'ky* and Neapolitan *struffole* have in common? They are all made to resemble animal fodder---another reminder of the Bethlehem stable! Muesli, grits, cracked wheat (*tabbouleh*), posole or barley

would also work.

Pagač stuffed with potatoes, cabbage or onions.

Soups: mushroom, mushroom barley, cabbage, bean, beet (boršč)

Dips: mushroom mačanka, bean puree

Pirohy (only if you're not strict fasting from butter, cheese and eggs). Think of them as pillows for baby Jesus.

Cabbage: Mushroom-barley stuffed cabbage, sautéed cabbage (kapusta)

Beans (*sometimes with prunes; actually better than it sounds!*)

Potatoes: mashed, baked or fried.

Fish: fresh or smoked, or shellfish. Fish are prominent whenever Jesus eats with others (Matthew 14:17; Luke 24:41; John 21:13).

Because fish were plentiful in Italy, the Italian *vigilia* is often an all-fish meal of seven courses.

Sweets: Dried fruit, fruit compote, nuts. (Kolač, which is rich in butter and eggs, would not be served if people are fasting strictly.)

9. CHRISTMAS CAROLS: At no other time in the year is it so easy or so beautiful to express your faith in song. Sing real carols—the ones that mention Jesus, not elves, mistletoe or snow. Sing between courses. Overcoming the pride or the fear that keeps many of us from singing at all would be a real spiritual breakthrough.

10. DETAILS: There are many local customs for Holy Supper. Some families eat all the courses out of a common pot or bowl as an expression of togetherness. Others bind a rope or chain around the legs of the table to express the same hope that the family would stay together.

Too Busy to Cook? You can buy the breads, soups, salads and main dishes ready made from many of the Polish delis in our area.

Don't like the menu? Create your own version focusing on seafood or vegetarian items. Delis and specialty shops could provide everything you need. Whatever the menu, keep a Holy Supper! Gathering your family around the table for an event that is sacred because it is about more than food and more than "me" is a priceless lesson. ***At no other time in the year is it so easy to invite God into your home and to claim the dignity God gave you when you were crowned in marriage!***

You can find out more about a traditional Byzantine Slav Svjatyj Večer and find recipes here:

<http://www.myerchin.org/RCP%20XmasEveHolySupper.html>

<http://www.carpatho-rusyn.org/customs/highland.html>; http://www.infoukes.com/culture/traditions/christmas/sviat_vechir.html