

THE BLESSING OF PASCHAL FOODS

“Basket blessing” is an important custom for many Slavic families, both Byzantine and Roman. It is a beautiful Christian tradition that ALL Christians could share. This is because it is not just an ethnic tradition—it is a BIBLICALLY BASED TRADITION. Its origins lie in the laws of sacrifice revealed by God to Moses on Sinai, and particularly the law regarding the Passover sacrifice (Exodus 12).

Sacrifice is the worship that God reveals and commands in the Old Testament. Every Old Testament sacrifice points the way to the one and only sacrifice which sufficed to make atonement for the sins of all humanity: Jesus’ self-sacrifice on the Cross. The Epistle to the Hebrews, which we have been hearing throughout the Sundays of the Fast, explains in detail how Jesus offered Himself on the Cross as both priest and victim in perfect fulfillment of the Old Testament laws for sin offerings (see Hebrews 9). We participate in Christ’s unique sacrifice at every Divine Liturgy.

Along with offering animals, grain, bread, wine and incense to God through burning, many Old Testament sacrifices were also meals. The participants ate some of the sacrificed foods and shared them with the priests and with the poor. Sacrifices were the only occasions on which most people ate meat. The Divine Liturgy offers us ongoing participation in Jesus’ once-and-for-all sacrifice on the Cross, and so we share in His sacrificed body and blood in Holy Communion. But on Pascha, the holiest day of the year, we are also invited to bring the sacrifice home and celebrate a particularly holy meal in our families.

Jesus offered His sacrifice on the Cross during the Jewish feast of Passover. The centerpiece of this feast was a sacrificial meal featuring paschal lamb and unleavened bread. Jesus identifies Himself with this sacrificed Lamb (John 1,29; John 19,36) and it was at meals that He appeared to His disciples after His resurrection (Luke 24; John 21). The earliest Christians understood the celebration of Pascha as the fulfillment of the Jewish Passover (1 Corinthians 5,7) and some even continued to celebrate the Jewish Passover meal. We should not be surprised, then, that two important items in the Paschal Basket are meat and bread. Southern Slavs, Greeks, Romanians, Italians and Albanians favor lamb, in direct continuation of the Passover symbolism. Northern Slavs tend to prefer pork products. The symbolism is the same. The bread – which Byzantine Slavs still call “Paska” (from the proper name for “Easter”) – is no longer unleavened Jewish matzah, but rich, sweet, raised bread which symbolizes the Risen Christ. Greeks and Italians prefer a braided sweet bread with dyed eggs baked in. A specialty from the Byzantine south of Italy, “pizza chiena” or “pizza rustica”, combines eggs, meats and cheese inside a bread crust. Tradition calls for including salt in the basket but few people realize why: the Old Testament commands that every sacrifice be accompanied by salt (Leviticus 2,13).

The egg is a natural symbol of Resurrection. Butter, cheeses and other dairy products also appear. All of these are animal products, luxuries from which we have abstained during the Fast. By blessing them, we receive them back again as God’s gifts to us, just as He gave them to humanity in our original innocence. The Paschal food blessing allows us to break our Lenten fast with special food, holy food. The most important reason for making our Paschal meal holy is also biblical. The yearly celebration of Christ’s Passion and Resurrection invites us to renew our own baptismal union with Christ. St Paul teaches: “we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death. We were indeed buried with Him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life” (Romans 6,3-4). More simply, Paul says: “Whoever is in Christ is a new creation” (2 Corinthians 5,17). On Pascha, we nourish our new life by eating new food, holy food.

Many Byzantine Catholics are not ethnic Slavs. Many of us treasure different recipes for our Paschal meals. **But ALL OF US should celebrate Pascha with blessed food. Every family should bring for blessing whatever will be on their tables on Pascha.** Ideally, your basket should include some sort of bread, some sort of meat and eggs. Children are encouraged to bring their own baskets, containing eggs, chocolates and whatever they gave up for the Fast. Adults can do the same. Wine was offered in the Old Testament and is totally appropriate for inclusion in the basket. Every basket should include a candle which recalls the candle we received at Baptism. Feel free to be

creative.
But please participate!

The sharing of blessed Paschal foods is one way of making “Holy Gifts for Holy People” a reality in your home, not just in Church.

It’s a tradition your children will remember and treasure.



