



## A BYZANTINE CATHOLIC CHRISTMAS

One of the most joyous holidays of the Byzantine Catholic Church, is the celebration of the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord. Preceding this feast is the fasting period, commonly known as the "Filipovka" (Phillip's Fast) which began on the Feast of St. Phillip.

During this period we are reminded to reflect and prepare ourselves spiritually for the celebration of this feast. On the Eve of Christmas all family members (grandparents, parents, and children) gather to share a special family meal. Today many look back and cherish their childhood memories of the "Holy Supper."

The various foods and customs surrounding this meal differed in Europe from village to village, from family to family, and thus became part of the heritage of many families here. Yet this custom of taking time to gather in joy as a family and to share a special meal is not only something done for fond memories, but a vital way of reaffirming today God's love for the world and a reaffirmation of the importance of the family where we learn to love and be loved. Beginning Christmas with "Holy Supper" is just as meaningful today as it was years ago. Its prime purpose being to gather the family.

The Christmas Eve supper begins at twilight, with the appearance in the heavens of the first star. The family gathers around the table to honor the Holy Child. The table, covered with a white tablecloth is symbolic of the swaddling clothes of Christ. Hay is placed on the table as a reminder of the poverty of the cave where Jesus was born. A large round bread, placed as the centerpiece, symbolizes Christ as the Bread of Life. The candle in the center of the bread recalls the Star of Bethlehem which led men to worship the true Light of the World. "Better is dinner of herbs where love is than a fatted calf and hatred with it." (Proverbs 15:17)

The meal begins with the Lord's prayer and then a prayer of thanksgiving for all the blessings of the past year and prayers for the good things in the coming year. The head of the family then greets those present with the traditional Christmas greeting "Christ is Born" to which they all reply "Let us glorify Him." Following this everyone partakes of the bread, garlic, and honey. Honey is symbolic of the sweetness of life while garlic is the symbol of bitterness.

The supper on the Holy Night generally consists of twelve different foods, symbolic of the twelve Apostles. These are non-meat foods, and in most instances are made without the use of dairy products for the Eve of Christmas was customarily a day of strict fast and a time of spiritual preparation for the worthy celebration of the birth of the Lord Jesus. The traditional dishes include a mushroom soup thickened with a brown sauce (zaprashka); bobal'ki, very small biscuits; pirohi, pagach, fish, peas, beans, fruit and nuts.

The hospitable Slav people have a saying: "Our hearts are open to strangers, kith and kin." And so an extra place was set for anyone who might come knocking at the door.

The Holy Supper is concluded with the singing of the Nativity Troparion and Christmas Carol.

Nativity Troparion & Kontakion

Troparion-Tone 4

Your birth, O Christ our God, has shed upon the world the light of knowledge, for through it, those who worshiped the stars have learned from a star to worship you, the Sun of Justice, and to know you, the Dawn from on High. Glory to you, O Lord!

Kontakion-Tone 3

Today the Virgin gives birth to the Transcendent One; and the earth offers a cave to the Unapproachable. The angels sing his glory with the shepherds; the wise men journey with the star. The eternal God is born for us as an infant child.

