

# The Christmas Eve Holy Supper

**(*Svjatyj Vecer / Velija*)**

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The Carpatho-Rusyn people maintain a wide variety of customs associated with all the holidays of the year, but few of them are as elaborate or as eagerly awaited as those associated with the Feast of the Nativity of Jesus Christ.

The entire drama of events associated with Christmas is made present in the Rusyn home by the observance of the Holy Supper. The custom of Holy Supper is observed wherever Rusyns live, but variations in customs and foods served at the meal are found from region to region, village to village, even among different families. These variations testify to the richness of the Rusyn culture, but in the unity of a tradition kept by all Rusyns.

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## Forty Days of Preparation

The season of Christmas is heralded by forty days of prayer and fasting beginning on November 15th, the day after the feast of Saint Philip the Apostle. This period is thus known as St. Philip's Fast (in Rusyn: *Fylypovka*) or the Nativity Fast. No festivities are held during this time, which is reserved for spiritual preparation for the Birth of the Savior.

Rusyns reserve the day of Christmas Eve to prepare for the Holy Supper. The men of the house spend the day caring for the livestock; the women are busy baking, cooking and cleaning. Weeks before, the houses are whitewashed or painted inside and out; this day is to make sure everything - and everyone - is thoroughly cleansed inside and out.

In our Carpathian Mountain villages, the "*gazda*" or head of the household feeds the animals with generous portions of food, honoring them as the animals who gathered at the cave to honor the newborn Christ child. There he picks up some straw or hay and enters the house. Asking God's blessings that the family all live to see the next Christmas, he places it on the table, under the tablecloth, or on the floor under the table. Seeds or garlic may also be scattered on the table. He might prepare a sheaf of wheat or oats ("*didko*" or "*Diduch*") and place it in a corner of the house under the icons in hopes of a rich and good harvest next year. A clean white linen cloth covers the dinner table, representing the swaddling clothes with which the Virgin Mary clothed her infant son. An empty chair and place are set at the table in memory of departed family members and reserved for the unexpected guest for whom there should always be room.

In the middle of the table sits a large round loaf of white, corn, rye or wheat bread, similar to the Easter Paska bread but variously called "*kracun*", "*krecun*", *kracunyk*, *rohac* or *lokška*. Candles are placed near the center of the table, or even one in the center of the bread. The bread represents Jesus Christ who called Himself "the Bread of Life." Another candle is placed in the window as a sign of welcome to any traveler seeking shelter. Finally, a manger scene or icon of the Nativity is placed on the table. The room now represents the cave and the manger of Bethlehem, the humble surroundings of the birth of Jesus Christ.

The entire family prepares to greet the newborn Jesus by hurrying to wash their faces and hands at a nearby cold stream, believing they will be kept clean and healthy throughout the next year.

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## The Evening Star Appears - At Last the Holy Supper Begins

The meal begins just as the first star appears in the sky at the setting of the sun. The first star represents the star of Bethlehem. The father then proceeds into the room greeting his family with "*Christos Razdajetsja*" - "Christ is Born!" The family replies, "*Slavite Jeho*" - "Glorify Him!" He then ties the four legs of the table with rope or chain, asking God's blessings and protection from all corners of the world. He also prays that the family be always united like the links of the chain.

The mother sprinkles the family members with holy water so that their souls and minds might be receptive to the meaning of the Birth of Christ. The father then takes the holy water to sprinkle the livestock and the household animals, after which they are given sugar or salt and plenty of feed. (It is a belief among many Rusyns that the animals can speak at midnight on Christmas Eve and would complain to God if they were mistreated!)

The candles on the table are lit to symbolize the appearance of Christ, the Light of the World, at His birth. The father or eldest so leads the family in kneeling prayer, like the adoration of Christ by the shepherds and wise men. The prayer expresses gratitude to God for His blessings during the past year. It includes petitions for health, happiness, long life and salvation, that the family may be united in love forever, and blessing of the food. Then the Troparion of Christmas is sung: "*Rozdestvo Tvoje Christe Boze naš, vozsija mirovi svit razuma....*" "Your Nativity, O Christ our God, has shed upon the world the light of knowledge...."

The food may be blessed with holy water. A toast "*vincovanja*" with sweet wine, brandy "*palenka*", or whiskey mixed with honey is offered, again by the father. It may be simple or quite elaborate, but is usually something like this: "Good Christians! I greet you on the Feast of Christ's Nativity and wish that the Lord grant you and your children good health and fortune to praise the eternal God for many blessed years!"; those present answer "*Daj Boze!*" - "Grant it, o God!"

The mother takes a tooth of garlic, dips it honey, and makes the sign of the cross on the forehead of the father and then on each member of the family according to seniority. The honey symbolizes the sweetness of life, the garlic - the bitterness. Garlic is held by Rusyns to have

curative powers and to keep away evil spirits. When the mother makes the sign of the cross on her eligible-for-marriage daughter, she exclaims. "May Jesus grant that young men will go after you like bees to honey!"

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## Twelve Dishes - But Even More Variations!

Since St. Philip's Fast culminates with a day of strict fasting on Christmas Eve, the Holy Supper dishes contain no meat and (usually) no dairy products. In some locales, Rusyns keep the fast so strictly that they eat no food on Christmas Eve until the Holy Supper! The meal consists of seven, nine, or even twelve courses, representing Christ's twelve Apostles. A wide variety of foods may be prepared, depending on the region or village, including:

- ***bobal'ki*** (small dough balls) with ***kapusta*** (sauerkraut) or poppyseeds and honey
- ***pyrohy*** filled with potatoes, ***lekvar*** (prunes) or sauerkraut
- mushrooms and onions fried in vegetable oil
- pea or lima bean soup
- stewed and fresh fruit
- sauces of dried plums (***slivcanka***) or pears (***hruščanka***)
- lentils
- nuts
- ***macanka*** (thick mushroom soup)
- mashed potatoes
- meatless ***holubki*** (cabbage stuffed with rice)
- fish or herring.

Regional dishes also give a specialized touch to the meal: ***kutja*** (boiled barley or buckwheat porridge with honey) in eastern Subcarpathia; ***kapušcanyk***, ***adzimka***, ***kniše***, or ***balja*** (variations of pagac cabbage pastry) in the Prešov Region, ***keselyca*** (fermented oatmeal and yeast) in the Lemko Region. No one is permitted to skip a dish; each person must at least taste it!

Between the servings of each course, traditional Rusyn carols may be sung, or amusing stories and family reminiscences told. The dinner and some individual dishes are accompanied by superstitious rites to predict what the coming year will hold: blowing candle smoke to see from what direction a suitor may come, throwing a bunch of tied spoons against the door, or using a spoon to toss *kutja* at the ceiling to see if it sticks (a sign of good fortune).

After dinner, the father reads the narrative of the birth of Jesus from the Bible. A prayer of thanksgiving is recited for the most precious gift of all, the only-begotten Son of God, Jesus Christ. Koljady (carols) are sung as the children eagerly hunt for nuts, fruit or coins or small toys hidden in the straw or in some secluded part of the home. If the family is fortunate enough to have a tree - it is decorated now.

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## The Carolers Arrive

The local carolers (*jaslickari / gubi / Betlehemcj / Vyfejenci / zvizdari*) may now pay a visit to the home. The carolers come dressed as angels and shepherds, carrying a miniature church (typical in Subcarpathia) or led in procession by a star on a pole (more common in the Lemko Region/Galicia). They dress in white garments, with tall cylinder hats and brightly colored ribbons across their chests, and they carry staves, perhaps with a bell at the end. Almost all ages - youngsters, teens, adults - are known to form "Bethlehem caroler" - or "Star Caroler" groups.

The *guba, kuba, dido* or *staryj pastyr*, the oldest shepherd (with a mask on his face) is the main character and also the comedian. The "Bethlehem play" they present is a short presentation of carols, sung greetings (*koljadky*), dialogue, dancing, and the announcement of Christ's birth. A puppet play, *vertep* (the cave) may be presented instead in some regions. The family then rewards the carolers with drinks or coins to thank them for their long journey from home to home. The carolers journey will continue after the evening church services, into the night, and throughout the next three days.

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## On To Church To Meet The Savior

The carolers, like angels, summon the listeners to Bethlehem to witness the miraculous birth of Christ. At the sound of the first bell the family hastens through the snow to the parish church to share in the joy of the service of Great Compline (*Povecerije velikoje*). As all its candles and icon lamps are progressively lit, the festively decorated church resounds with the antiphonal chanting of prophetic verses from the Old Testament Book of Isaiah concerning the coming of the Messiah, each followed by the response "*S nami Boh, razumijte jazyci, I pokarjajtesja, jako s nami Boh!*" "God is with us, give ear o you nations and submit yourselves, for God is with us!" Like angels and shepherds and wise men of old, the Rusyn family joins the ranks of saints and apostles of every age who truly celebrate the birth of the Savior.

*Christos Razdajetsja!  
Slavite Jeho!*

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