



# Holy Supper

Christmas Eve in the Byzantine Catholic and Orthodox Tradition

The Christmas Eve Holy Supper is a cherished celebration among Byzantine Catholics and Orthodox Christians, marking the Feast of the Nativity of Jesus Christ. Across many countries and communities, this tradition is observed with variations in customs and foods served at the meal, reflecting the diverse heritage and unity shared by all who keep these practices.

The entire drama of events associated with Christmas is brought into the home by the observance of the Holy Supper. Although the customs and dishes may differ from region to region, village to village, and even among different families, these variations testify to the richness and unity found within the wider tradition of Byzantine Catholic and Orthodox communities.

### Forty Days of Preparation

The season of Christmas is preceded by forty days of prayer and fasting, beginning the day after the feast of Saint Philip the Apostle (November 14/27, new calendar/old calendar). This period is known as the Nativity Fast. During this time, festivities are set aside, as families focus on spiritual preparation for the Birth of the Savior.

Christmas Eve is reserved for preparing the Holy Supper. Traditionally, men spend the day caring for the household and livestock, while women are busy baking, cooking, and cleaning. Weeks ahead, homes are whitewashed or freshly painted; on this day, everything and everyone is thoroughly cleansed inside and out, symbolizing readiness for the joyous occasion.

In many villages, the head of the household honors the animals by feeding them generously, recalling the creatures who gathered at the manger to welcome the newborn Christ. He may bring straw or hay into the house, asking God's blessings for the family to see another Christmas, and place it on the table, under the tablecloth, or on the floor beneath the table. Seeds or garlic may also be scattered on the table. A sheaf of wheat or oats is sometimes prepared and set in a corner under icons, hoping for a rich harvest in the coming year. A clean white linen cloth covers the dinner table, representing the swaddling clothes of the infant Jesus. An empty chair and

place are set at the table in memory of departed loved ones and to welcome any unexpected guests in the spirit of hospitality.

At the center of the table is a large round loaf of bread, which may be made from white, corn, rye, or wheat flour—similar to Easter bread, and known by various names according to local customs. Candles are placed near the center of the table, or sometimes one is set in the bread itself. The bread symbolizes Jesus Christ, "the Bread of Life." Another candle may be placed in the window as a sign of welcome to any traveler seeking shelter. A manger scene or Nativity icon is also set on the table, transforming the room into a symbolic cave and manger of Bethlehem, the humble birthplace of Jesus Christ.

Before the meal, the entire family prepares to greet the newborn Jesus by washing their faces and hands, often at a nearby cold stream, in the belief that this will keep them clean and healthy throughout the coming year.

### The Evening Star Appears – The Holy Supper Begins

The meal begins at sunset, as soon as the first star appears in the sky, representing the Star of Bethlehem. The father or eldest proceeds into the room, greeting the family with "Christ is Born!" and is answered with "Glorify Him!" He then ties the four legs of the table with rope or chain, sprinkled with holy water, asking God's blessing and protection from all corners of the world. This act symbolizes the enduring bond of the family.

The mother sprinkles family members with holy water, praying that their souls and minds be receptive to the meaning of the Birth of Christ. The father then blesses the household animals, reminding everyone of the animals present at Christ's birth. Afterward, the animals are fed. There is a belief in many communities that animals can speak at midnight on Christmas Eve and would complain to God if mistreated!

The candles on the table are lit, symbolizing the appearance of Christ, the Light of the World. The family kneels together in prayer, emulating the adoration of Christ by the shepherds and wise men. Prayers express gratitude

for blessings received during the past year, petitions for health, happiness, long life, salvation, and unity in love, along with a blessing for the food. The Troparion of Christmas may be sung: "Your Birth, O Christ our God, has shed upon the world the light of knowledge..."

The food may then be blessed with holy water. A toast with sweet wine, brandy, or whiskey mixed with honey is offered, often by the father. The blessing may be simple or elaborate, typically asking for the Lord's grace and good fortune for all present. The prayer is followed by the exchange of the Christmas Greeting: "CHRIST IS BORN! GLORIFY HIM!" after which everyone may be seated.

The father breaks the bread, first making the sign of the cross on the bottom of the loaf with a knife, and gives a piece to each family member. The bread is a symbol of Christ, the Bread of Life, and is then eaten by all.

The mother takes a tooth of garlic, dips it in honey, and makes the sign of the cross on the forehead of the father and then on each family member according to seniority. Honey symbolizes the sweetness of life, while garlic represents its bitterness and is thought to have curative powers and to ward off evil spirits.

## Twelve Dishes – And Many Variations

Since the Nativity Fast culminates with a strict day of fasting on Christmas Eve, the Holy Supper features dishes that contain no meat and usually no dairy products. In some areas, the fast is kept so strictly that no food is eaten on Christmas Eve until the Holy Supper begins. The meal may consist of seven, nine, or twelve courses, representing Christ's twelve Apostles. A wide variety of foods are prepared, depending on local customs. These may include:

- Bobalki (small dough balls) with sauerkraut or poppyseeds and honey
- Pirohi filled with potatoes, prunes (lekvar), or sauerkraut
- Mushrooms and onions fried in vegetable oil
- Pea or lima bean soup

- Stewed and fresh fruit
- Sauces of dried plums or pears
- Lentils
- Nuts
- Machanka (thick mushroom soup)
- Mashed potatoes
- Meatless stuffed cabbage with rice

Between the servings of each course, traditional carols may be sung, or amusing stories and family reminiscences told. 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.

### **Traditional Recipes for Holy Supper**

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While the 12 courses served for the Holy Supper on the eve of the Nativity of Christ vary from household to household, all are prepared without meat or dairy, as this meal is served on a day of strict fast. Dishes served can often include the following:

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|--------------------|---------------------------|
| • Wine             | • Sauerkraut              |
| • Lenten Bread     | • Soup (bean or mushroom) |
| • Garlic and Honey | • Stewed Prunes           |
| • Bobalki          | • Stewed Apricots         |
| • Lenten Pirohi    | • Nuts                    |
| • Mashed Potatoes  | • Coffee/Tea              |
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### **BREAD FOR CHRISTMAS EVE**

1 pkg (1 ounce) cake yeast or 1 pkg dry yeast  
1 cup lukewarm water  
½ tsp sugar  
3 cups all-purpose flour  
1/2 tsp salt  
1/4 cup oil

Sift flour and salt in a bowl. Dissolve the yeast and sugar in warm water. Set in a warm place to rise. Add to the flour mixture, knead until smooth. Let it rise until it doubles in size. Then place in a 9-inch greased pie pan and let rise again. Bake at 400°F for 30 minutes. Makes one loaf.

*Note: This dough may also be used for making Christmas Eve Bobalki.*

### **CHRISTMAS EVE BOBALKI**

Knead and roll the dough on a floured board into a rope. Cut and roll into balls about 1 inch in diameter. Place on a floured pan & let rise for about 15 minutes. Bake at 350 for 10 minutes or until just slightly brown, then remove & let cool. Place in vigorously boiling water for up to two minutes until they just start to soften. Drain in colander & add oil/onion or honey/poppy seed mixture (heat honey with a bit of water, 1/2 cup ground poppy seed & 1/4 cup sugar). Pour over bobalki before placing in a serving dish. *While our family always serves these hot, others prefer to let the bobalki stand for several hours in a cool place (or in the refrigerator) before serving.*

*Note: Some bobalki are served with sweet cabbage or sauerkraut. Sauté cabbage or*

*sauerkraut with onion in oil, then mix with bobalki.*

### **CHRISTMAS EVE BOBALKI**

1 pkg. yeast  
1 tsp salt  
1 Tbsp sugar  
½ cup lukewarm water  
6 cups flour  
2 cups water (approximately)  
1 Tbsp sugar  
¼ cup oil

Dissolve yeast in lukewarm water; add salt and 1 tablespoon sugar. Let it set about 10 minutes. Sift flour and add sugar. Add yeast mixture and rest of ingredients. Knead well. Let rise until doubled. Punch down. Cut off portions of dough about the size of an egg. Roll out on floured board by hand to make roll about 1 inch in diameter. Cut into 1-inch pieces. Place on greased cookie sheet. Let rise about 20 minutes.

Bake at 350 for about 10 minutes or until lightly browned. Cool & separate. Place in colander. Pour boiling water over Bobalki. Drain quickly to prevent sogginess.

Any of the following mixtures may be used on the Bobalki:

1. Sauté 1 small onion in 2 tablespoons of oil. Add 1 pound sauerkraut (drained); cook for about 15 minutes. Add the mixture to half of Bobalki.
2. Combine 1 cup ground poppy seed, 2 Tbsp honey & 4 tablespoons water. Add to the remaining Bobalki. Mix well.
3. Melt 1 stick of margarine. Combine with two tablespoons of honey & 1/2 cup of strawberry preserves.

### **LENTEN PIROHI**

2 cups flour  
 1/2 tsp salt  
 3/4 cup potato water

Combine all the ingredients above and work into a smooth dough. Add flour as needed. Set aside and cover with a damp cloth. *POTATO FILLING:* Peel and cut potatoes as for mashed potatoes. Cook until done. Drain water just before potatoes are finished cooking. Fry the onion in oil, trying not to brown it. After the water is drained from the potatoes, add the fried onion, oil, salt, and pepper, then mash and mix well.

Roll the dough out 1/8 inch thick, cut into 3 or 4-inch squares or circles, and fill with the mashed potato mixture. Fold the dough over, and PINCH FIRMLY together to seal tightly. Important! Moisten the edges of the dough with water if the dough doesn't want to stick together. Drop pirohi a few at a time into boiling salted water. Stir gently with a flat wooden spoon throughout the process to ensure all the pirohi are thoroughly cooked. Cook until they float to the top, then cook for another 4 to 5 minutes. Lift out of the pan with

a slotted spoon, rinse with hot water, and drain well in a colander. Coat them all with melted margarine to prevent them from sticking together. Sauté some onions in oil or margarine and pour over pirohi before serving.

*JAM FILLING:* Jam can be purchased in most specialty shops, and in a lot of supermarkets.

*SAUERKRAUT FILLING:* Drain and rinse the sauerkraut in cold water. Brown some diced onion in some shortening and add the sauerkraut to cook for a few minutes.

### **OVEN ROASTED POTATOES**

Cook potatoes whole in their skins. When cool, skin, cube and place in an oven baking dish. Cover with oil, chopped onion, salt and pepper. Place under broiler until brown.

*Note: Brown chopped onion in a little oil. Add to mashed potatoes and serve.*

*Note: 2 Tbsp. horseradish can also be added in place of browned onion for a zesty flavor.*

### **ZAPRASHKA**

*Zaprashka is a brown sauce used for seasoning vegetables, especially on strict fast days. It is also used to thicken soups & stews.*

3 Tbsp. salad oil

3 Tbsp flour

3 Tbsp diced onion

In skillet, heat salad oil, then add diced onion and brown well. Remove browned onions and add them to sauerkraut and the mushroom soup. Add flour to remaining oil slowly; brown slowly also (watch) so as not to burn. Add water and boil for 2 min. Add to sauerkraut, mix well, heat for five minutes, then add to Machanka (mushroom soup) or other soups.

### **SAUERKRAUT 1**

1 large can sauerkraut  
salt to taste  
pepper to taste  
onion

Sauté some onions in oil until soft and golden. Wash sauerkraut several times in a colander. Save some sauerkraut juice to add sourness to your liking if needed. Put in a pot with sautéed onions and add enough water to cover. Season with salt and pepper. Bring to a boil. Lower heat and simmer for one (1) hour.

### **SAUERKRAUT 2**

2 large cans kraut  
oil  
1 heaping Tbsp flour  
3 cloves garlic  
Salt and pepper  
1 medium potato

Rinse the kraut in a pan of cold water and drain. Place the kraut in a kettle of fresh water. Water level should cover kraut about 1 inch above kraut. Cook for 1 hour, then add 2 mashed cloves of garlic and salt and pepper to taste. Grate the potato and add to the kraut. Let cook for 1 1/2 hours.

Sauté 1 chopped garlic clove in the oil; gradually add the tablespoon of flour & fry until lightly browned. Add to kraut; continue to cook mixture for approximately 1/2 hour. Makes 8-10 servings.

### **GREEN SPLIT PEA SOUP**

1 lb. dry green split peas  
1 medium onion, diced  
1 celery stalk, diced

Soak the peas in cold water overnight. Drain & add 6 to 7 cups of water, onion and celery. Bring to a boil, skim the starch that comes to the top from time to time. Lower the heat and simmer for 2 or 3 hours. Stir to prevent sticking. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Prepare zaprashka and combine with 1/2cup sauerkraut juice and boil for 5 minutes. Add this mixture to the soup and boil for 1/2 an hour longer. Add more water if too thick.

### **PEA SOUP**

1 lb. whole green peas  
2 Tbsp flour  
3 potatoes  
1/2 small onion diced  
5 quarts water  
1 Tbsp oil  
Salt and pepper

Thickening: Make a thickening by frying the oil and flour until light brown, then adding onion and frying until well browned. Add zaprashka to the pea soup and cook 10-15 minutes. This makes a large pot of soup.

Note: if you have hard water, soak peas in water. Cook peas in water until almost done. Then add potatoes and cook until done. Add salt and pepper to taste.

**MACHANKA** (mushrooms & gravy)

1 lb. fresh mushrooms or canned mushrooms  
4 Tbsp Oil  
4 Tbsp flour  
1 clove garlic, cut up  
Salt & pepper  
2 cups water  
Vinegar (optional)

Clean, wash, and drain mushrooms. Cut mushrooms up with garlic. Add 1 cup of water and let it simmer for about 1/2 hour. Make a brown sauce (Zaprashka), blending oil and flour together in a frying pan. Keep on medium heat and keep stirring until lightly browned. Cool slightly and add 1 cup of cold water and blend until smooth. Pour this brown sauce into the cooked mushroom mixture. Cook the mushrooms until tender. Add salt, pepper, and a little vinegar to taste.

**MUSHROOM SOUP (MAF)**

7 cups fresh mushrooms (chopped)  
3 quarts water  
1 quart sauerkraut juice

Wash the dried mushrooms & soak them overnight in water. In the morning, cook the mushrooms \*in the same water used for soaking\*. Add salt & pepper to taste. Cook slowly for two hours or more. Prepare zaprashka & combine with 1/2c sauerkraut juice & boil for 5 minutes. Add this mixture to the soup & boil for 1/2 an hour longer.

**MUSHROOM SAUERKRAUT SOUP**

1 cup dried mushrooms  
1 cup sauerkraut juice  
1 quart water  
1 small onion, chopped  
Salt and pepper  
1 Tbsp flour  
1 potato, cubed (optional)

Soak dried mushrooms in cold water overnight or at least 2 hours. Drain and chop. Add water, sauerkraut juice, and oil to the soup pot. Simmer 2 hours. Add potatoes now if desired.

Brown flour in oil in a frying pan. Stir constantly or the flour will burn. Add about a cup of soup, stirring constantly, to make a thin gravy (zaprashka). Add to the soup. Simmer 15 minutes more. Adjust seasoning.

**BARLEY, BEAN and PEA SOUP**

1/2 lb. dried kidney or pinto beans  
1/4 cup split peas  
1/4cup pearl barley  
1 clove garlic  
Salt and pepper

Put beans in a pot and cover with water. Cook until beans are soft, adding water as needed. When beans are done, add 1 cup of sauerkraut. Make the Zaprashka and add to the soup. Add salt and pepper to taste.

### **STEWED PRUNES**

1 lb. dried prunes  
Sugar (optional)  
2 Tbsp lemon juice (1/2 lemon)

Combine prunes and lemon juice in a two-quart saucepan. Cover with enough cold water and bring to a boil. Turn the heat down and simmer for about 40 minutes. Add more sugar to taste if you want.

### **STEWED APRICOTS**

1 lb. dried apricots  
Sugar (optional)  
2 Tbsp lemon juice (1/2 lemon)

Combine fruit and lemon juice in a two-quart saucepan. Cover with cold water. Bring to a boil, lower the heat, and simmer for 40 minutes. Add more water if you want more juice in the serving. Add sugar if you have a 'sweet' tooth.

*Note: Almost any other kind of dried fruit can be used.*

### **LIMA BEAN SOUP**

\* lb. dried lima beans  
1 \* qt. water  
2 \* cups raw potatoes, diced  
2 Tbsp ketchup  
1 Tbsp oil  
1 small or medium onion  
2 Tbsp flour  
Salt and pepper

Bring lima beans and water to a boil; cook until partially done, approximately 1 hour. Add more water if necessary. Season with salt and pepper. Add raw potatoes and ketchup. Brown the onion lightly in butter. Add flour and continue browning until golden. Add hot water, about 1 cup; stir until well blended. Add the lima bean mixture and continue cooking all ingredients, adding water as needed, until done.

Sources (abbreviated and edited):

[www.wirnowski.com](http://www.wirnowski.com)

[www.byzcath.com](http://www.byzcath.com)

