

# The Easter Basket and the Blessing of Easter Foods

## A Byzantine Catholic Tradition

*“This is the Day of Resurrection, let us be enlightened by the feast and embrace one another.”*



Throughout the world, Byzantine Catholics everywhere preserve each year the time-honored tradition of taking specially prepared baskets loaded with holiday foods to church for the traditional Paschal blessing. After the long season of fasting and sacrifice, this venerable and beloved tradition for many is a “must” to bring all the joy of Pascha into the home on Easter Sunday.

This tradition is more than an ethnic custom; it is a means to define just who we are as Byzantine Catholics. Our traditions make our liturgical worship inspiring, spiritually rich and close to our hearts in our daily lives. What keeps these traditions “alive” is our understanding and continued observance of them. What is important is the “spirit” of the tradition, not necessarily how it is practiced; this way we make them our own, built on our own individual heritage, so that they speak to our own families and become a deep and personal expression of our one Byzantine Catholic faith.

Since meat and dairy products are traditionally excluded from the daily diet during all or part of the Great Fast, we as Byzantine Catholics now show our joy and gratitude by having these foods blessed before we once again enjoy them. Having prepared ourselves during the Fast, we now rejoice and partake of this blessed food which becomes the first meal eaten after the Divine Liturgy on Easter.

By sharing food with the Apostles after His glorious resurrection, our Savior wanted to indicate that the kingdom of God already was inaugurated; He described the participation in the kingdom of God as “a great banquet,” and the Book of Revelation describes this heavenly banquet as the “wedding feast of the Lamb” (Rev. 19:9). Our liturgical observance of blessing foods reminds us of our participation in the “divine joy of Christ’s kingdom.” When partaking with joy of the tasty Easter foods, we express our unshakable faith in the new and better life awaiting us in the heavenly kingdom.



Customs as to what goes into the Easter basket vary from family to family and from heritage to heritage. The traditional basket always contains certain symbolic foods: bread, meat, dairy, salt and bitter herbs. However, it is important to make the Easter basket our own ... with our own recipes and family foods.

The basket always contains the traditional Easter **bread** (called “pascha”) which is a large round loaf of yeast bread, made of white flour and enriched and sweetened by adding eggs, raisins, and milk. On top it is decorated with a crown and a cross of various designs made out of the same dough. It symbolizes our Lord, the living Bread Who came down from heaven to give life to the world. There are many recipes for this traditional bread. Since the preparation is very time consuming, many families today often purchase a round loaf of sweetened bread, such as challah bread, the Italian “panettone” or similar.



The **meat products** symbolize the sacrificial animals of the Old Testament, foreshadowing the true sacrifice of our Savior, who became for us the Lamb of God. Meat also symbolizes the fattened calf prepared for the Prodigal Son on his return to his father. These products traditionally include: sausage, either fresh or smoked and symbolic of God's favor and generosity; ham, representing great joy and abundance (though some families prefer lamb to recall the Risen Christ as the Lamb of God); and bacon, symbolic of the overabundance of God's mercy and wealth of blessing.



The **dairy products of cheese, butter and eggs** remind us of the prosperity and peace which reigns in the land of milk and honey as foretold by the Prophets: butter, usually shaped into a lamb mold or placed in a dish with cloves in the form of a cross studding the top, is symbolic of the goodness of Christ; farmer's cheese or cream cheese is symbolic of the moderation Christians should have at all times; eggs, hard boiled and decorated, remind us that our Savior came forth from a tomb with a new life and bodily resurrection.

**Salt**, which is used to preserve foods, is a symbol of incorruptibility and permanence. In Holy Scripture salt signified an everlasting covenant ... a symbol of purity, perfection, wisdom and fidelity; as our Lord reminded us, we as Christians are the light of the world and the "salt of the earth" (Matthew 5:13-15). Finally, **bitter herbs** or **horseradish**, mixed with grated beets, symbolic of the bitterness of Christ's passion and the blood He shed for us, complete the basket.

Many families will include special dishes unique to their own heritage, as well as a sweet wine, chocolates, nut, poppyseed and apricot rolls, fruits, and other sweets. These foods are placed in a basket decorated with flowers, pussy willows with a ribbon and bow tied to the handle. A decorated candle is placed in the basket and is lit at the time of blessing. A linen cover often embroidered with the words "Christ is Risen" is placed over the foods when brought to the church.



The blessing of Easter foods has a very deep liturgical and spiritual meaning. It is one of the most beautiful and meaningful customs which our devoted ancestors have given us. Let us make the blessing of Easter baskets our own, with our own special touches and foods, and preserve these wonderful faith-expressions of our one, holy Byzantine Catholic Church.

**May You have a happy and Blessed Pascha!  
Christ is Risen! Indeed, he is Risen!**



*Easter baskets will be blessed here at Epiphany of Our Lord following the Divine Liturgy of Pascha on both Saturday evening and Sunday morning.*