

Ukrainian Christmas-*The Way-Christmas 2004*

For the Ukrainian people Christmas is the most important family holiday of the whole year. It is celebrated solemnly, as well as merrily, according to ancient customs that have come down through the ages and are still observed today.

Ukrainian Christmas customs are based not only on Christian traditions, but to a great degree on those of the pre-Christian, pagan culture and religion. The Ukrainian society was basically agrarian at that time and had developed a corresponding pagan culture, elements of which have survived to this day.

Christianity was introduced into Ukraine in 988 A.D. The flourishing pagan religion and traditions associated with it were too deeply rooted in the people to allow the Church to eradicate them completely. Therefore, the Church adopted a policy of tolerance toward most of the ancient customs and accepted many as part of the Christian holidays. In this way, the ancient pagan Feasts of Winter Solstice, Feasts of Fertility became part of Christian Christmas customs. This is perhaps why Ukrainian Christmas customs are quite unique and deeply symbolic.

Ukrainian Christmas festivities begin on Christmas Eve and end on the Feast of the Epiphany. The Christmas Eve Supper or Sviata Vecheria (Holy Supper) brings the family together to partake in special foods and begin the holiday with many customs and traditions which reach back to antiquity. The rituals of Christmas Eve are dedicated to God, to the welfare of the family, and to the remembrance of ancestors.

With the appearance of the first star, which is believed to be the Star of Bethlehem, the family gathers to begin supper. The table is covered with two tablecloths, one for the ancestors of the family, the second for the living members. In pagan times ancestors were considered to be benevolent spirits who, when properly respected, brought good fortune to the living family members. Under the table, as well as under the tablecloths some hay is spread to remember that Christ was born in a manger. The table always has one extra place-setting for the deceased family members, whose souls, according to belief, come on Christmas Eve and partake of the food.

A kolach (Christmas bread) is placed in the center of the table. This bread is braided into a ring, and three such rings are placed one on top of the other, with candle in the center of the top one. The three rings symbolize the Trinity and the circular form represents Eternity.

A didukh (meaning grandfather) is a sheaf of wheat stalks or made of mixed grain stalks. It is placed under the icons in the house. In Ukraine, this is a very important Christmas tradition, because the stalks of grain symbolize all the ancestors of the family, and it is believed that their spirits reside in it during the holidays.

After the didukh is positioned in the place of honor, the father or head of the household places a bowl of kutia (boiled wheat mixed with poppy seeds and honey) next to it. Kutia is the most important food of the entire Christmas Eve Supper, and is also called God's Food. A jug of uzvar (stewed fruits, which should contain twelve different fruits) and is called God's Drink, is also served.

After all the preparations have been completed, the father offers each member of the family a piece of bread dipped in honey, which had been previously blessed in church. He then leads the family in prayer. After the prayer the father extends his best wishes to everyone with the greeting Khrystos Razhdaietsia (Christ is born), and the family sits down to a twelve-course meatless Christmas Eve Supper.

There are twelve courses in the Supper because; according to the Christian tradition each course is dedicated to one of Christ's Apostles. According to ancient pagan belief, each course stood was for every full moon during the course of the year. The courses are meatless because there is a period of fasting required by the Church until Christmas Day. However, for the pagans, the meatless dishes were a form of sacrifice to the gods.

The first course is always kutia. It is the main dish of the whole supper. Then comes borshch (beet soup) with vushka (boiled dumplings filled with chopped mushrooms and onions). This is followed by a variety of fish-baked, broiled, fried, cold in aspic, fish balls, marinated herring and so on. Then come varenyky (boiled dumplings filled with cabbage, potatoes, buckwheat grains, or prunes. There are also holobtsi (stuffed cabbage), and the supper ends with uzvar.

Ukrainian Christmas Carols

