CHRISTMAS EVE HOLY SUPPER---SVJATYJ VEČER
BRINGING THE FEAST OF THE NATIVITY HOME

Americans have Thanksgiving, but many Christian cultures have special, ritualized meals to mark major feasts on the Church calendar. The Christmas Eve Holy Supper as practiced by Poles, Slovaks, Ukrainians, Rusyns and Lithuanians, may be the most elaborate of all. Just about every detail of the seven- or twelve-course meal is rich in symbolism. But Slavs aren't the only people with special Christmas foods. Although the menu varies from region to region, the Italian *vigilia di Natale* is also rich in religious symbols. Our parish family brings together people of many backgrounds, and the Good News of Jesus Christ's birth can be expressed in the symbols of any of the cultures we come from. Here are a few ideas for using the occasion of your Christmas meal to bring home the message of the Incarnation, to share the Good News and to make sure God has a place at your table. Many of these customs are inspired by the Holy Supper as celebrated in Slav homes for centuries.

1. THE TABLE: A **white tablecloth** recalls the swaddling bands in which the newborn Christ was wrapped. **Straw** sprinkled on the table for decoration recalls the manger in which He lay (Luke 2,7). A **single candle** recalls Christ—the light of revelation to the nations (Luke 2,32) and the light of the world (John 9,5).

2. THE STAR: Send the children out to look for **the first evening star**. Do not begin the meal until they have found one. This recalls the star that led the Magi to Christ (Matthew 2,1-11).

3. WASHING: Of course you wash your hands before eating! But tonight, washing with a ewer and basin could be a Christlike act of service to others (John 13,2-17) and a reminder of our Baptism, by which we are united to the newborn Christ (Galatians 3,27).

4. A PLACE AT THE TABLE: Set an extra place at the table for the unexpected guest or for the Christ Child Himself. If you have pets, tonight it is appropriate to set a place for them too and share a little of each course, since it was animals who were companions to the newborn Christ in the manger (Isaiah 1,3). In warmer climates, the front door might even be left open signifying that there is "room" for Christ here, even if there was no room at the inn (Luke 2,7). The Irish express this welcome with a single candle placed in the window of the family home.

5. PRAYER: The meal should begin by singing (OK, recite if you must!) the Christmas troparion (tone 4): "Your birth, O Christ our God, has shed upon the world the light of knowledge. For through it those who worshipped 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." The head of the house should greet everyone: "Christ is born!" to which the response is "Glorify Him!"

6. TOASTS: It is appropriate to offer three: for the deceased, for those present, and the absent.

*SACRAMENTS: Baptism, Chrismation, Holy Eucharist, Penance, Matrimony, Holy Orders, Anointing of the Sick.

7. BREAKING BREAD: A special loaf of bread should be prominent on the table. Different cultures have different Christmas breads—*prosfora*, *oplatek*, *Oblaten*, *kračun*, *poplanik*, *kolač*—but everyone at the table should partake from the single loaf. Prayers and good wishes can be shared along with the bread as it is broken and passed. Bread always reminds us of Christ, the Bread of Life (John 6,35) but tonight we are also reminded that Jesus was born in Bethlehem (Matthew 2,5-6), which in Hebrew means "House of Bread."

8. THE MENU: Christmas Eve is a day of abstinence. No meat should be eaten and many people also abstain from dairy. Fish, vegetables, fruits, nuts and grains are the traditional foods for Christmas Eve. What do Ukrainian *kutya*, Slovak *bobal'ky* and Neapolitan *struffole* have in common? They are all made to resemble animal fodder---another reminder of the Bethlehem stable! There should be seven (for the Sacraments) or twelve (for the Apostles) courses—hence the famous Italian "Seven Fishes"! Can anyone at the table name all seven Sacraments?* All twelve Apostles?** (Beats talking sports trivia or politics!) Serve something in threes (a trio of desserts?) to recall the Three Magi (who can name them?***). The tamales (corn husks wrapped around a filling) enjoyed by our Mexican neighbors at Christmas resemble the Baby Jesus, wrapped in swaddling clothes. Maybe you can invent a new symbolic Christmas food!

9. CHRISTMAS CAROLS: At no other time in the year is it so easy or so beautiful to express your faith in song. Sing real carols—the ones that mention Jesus, not elves, mistletoe or snow.

10. DETAILS: There are many local customs for Holy Supper. Some families eat all the courses out of a common pot as an expression of togetherness. Others bind a rope or chain around the legs of the table to express the same hope that the family would stay together. Slavs begin the meal with garlic dipped in honey—eaten or anointed on the forehead—as a prayer for strength (like garlic) and sweetness (like honey) in the New Year. Some families forbid knives at the table—since Christ is the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9,5) and the angels proclaimed "Peace on earth"(Luke 2,14).

11. ENTERTAINMENT: Traditional Christmas entertainment is going caroling from house to house. Slavs also perform a skit about shepherds going house to house searching for the Christ Child (*Jasličkari* or *Gubi* or *Viflijemska Ihra*). Why not let the kids set up the manger scene and tell the story of each character as it is placed in the manger? (See Matthew 2 and Luke 2.)

You can find out much more about a traditional Byzantine Slav Svjatyj Večer and find recipes here: http://www.myerchin.org/RCP%20XmasEveHolySupper.html
http://www.ehow.com/how_2066812_serve-traditional-carpathorusyn-holy-supper.html
http://www.carpatho-rusyn.org/customs/highland.html
http://www.infoukes.com/culture/traditions/christmas/sviat_vechir.html

**APOSTLES: Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Matthew, James, Jude, Simon, Matthias (replacing Judas)
***MAGI: Caspar, Melchior, Balthesar.