

THE HOLY SUPPER

You may have heard about the "Holy Supper" on Christmas Eve. Or maybe you haven't! It is a special tradition carried on by many families of Eastern European origin. Each region, and sometimes each specific family, has particular traditions and dishes that they serve on this day, but the general idea is the same: since the Nativity Fast comes before Christmas, this is the last meal of the fast, so it's full of special dishes that are served and lots of symbolism in preparation for the celebration of Jesus's birth.

Families clean the house in preparation for Christmastime, but they are sure to leave the spider webs alone! There is a traditional story that the spiders helped the Holy Family as they fled into Egypt after Jesus's birth. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph hid in a cave to escape Herod's soldiers, and the spiders covered up the entrance with their webs so that the soldiers wouldn't enter. This is why, in some families, they decorate their Christmas tree with spider web ornaments.



In the evening, the children are to keep watch for the first star in the sky. The supper will start when they have found it! Some hay is put on the table first, to represent the manger where Jesus was laid. The table is set with a white tablecloth, in honor of the swaddling clothes used for baby Jesus. A special kind of braided Christmas bread, called kolach, is put in the middle of the table, to represent Jesus, who is the Bread of Life. The braid on the loaf is made of three pieces of dough, to represent the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The braid is connected in a circle to represent the One God. Then a candle is placed in the middle of the loaf, to represent Jesus, who is the Light of the World, and the Star of Bethlehem, which led the Magi to the Christ Child.

Families will set an extra place at the table in honor of their ancestors who have died. It is also a place for any visitor who may come, because Jesus told us that if we serve others, we are serving Him. Traditionally, the animals are the ones to be fed first, because the animals were the first of creation to see the newborn Jesus! There is also the *didukh*, which means "grandfather," a sheaf of wheat which is set on the table or by an icon, to remind the family of their many ancestors who have shared their wisdom and legacy through the years. It is also symbolic of the bread we eat, which sustains our families.

Once the star has been spotted and the supper begins, hymns are sung and prayers are prayed, the candle on the table is lit, and some bread, often *prospophora* which may have been given to the family from their church at an earlier time, is broken and given to each one present. Everyone then dips their bread in honey, to remind us of the sweetness of God's gifts and of Christ feeding the multitude. Some families will use garlic and honey, to remind us of the bitterness of life before Christ, and the sweetness of life which comes after Him.

Twelve dishes are then served in honor of the 12 Apostles. Some of those dishes may include *kutia*, a dish of boiled wheat, honey, and poppy seeds, which represents life and death, and is eaten first at the Holy Supper to represent the life Christ has given to us. Other dishes include vegetables, such as mushrooms, which were often dried because that was the way these foods could be preserved in the winter, and to show the wealth from the earth that God has given to us. The entire meal would have been made of foods that were abundant in the area in which the families lived. The Holy Supper is a wonderful tradition that has been shared among families for generations, and it may be a tradition that your parish shares, or your own family takes part in every Christmas Eve. What a beautiful way to bring families together and help us grow closer to Christ in preparation for His Birth! - Written By Carrie Chuff

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