

# ON FEASTING AND THE CUSTOM OF PASCHA BASKETS

*The table is full: do ye all fare sumptuously. The calf is ample: let no one go forth hungry.*  
—Pentecostarion, Catechetical Homily of St. John Chrysostom

¶ As Orthodox Christians, we've all listened to plenty of sermons on the importance of fasting. We all know, or have means at our disposal to know, how important this discipline is to our spiritual life. But we're coming up on the Feast of Feasts and Day of Days, when we'll engage in another, not unrelated activity: feasting.

¶ Particularly after the strictures of Lent, it's common to approach feasting almost as a negative response against fasting: having abstained from certain foods so long, we try to stuff ourselves with as much of those foods as we can, as quickly as we can. Not for nothing did St. John of Sinai write that "The gluttonous monk. . . counts the days to Easter, and for days in advance he gets the food ready. The slave of the belly ponders the menu with which to celebrate the feast. The servant of God, however, thinks of the graces that may enrich him" (*Ladder*, step 14). The danger should be obvious: if we approach feasting as a deliberate undoing of the fast on a physical level, its spiritual undoing may not be far behind.

¶ But what about that second part? What about "the graces that may enrich us" as we celebrate the feast? How do we feast on the rich foods of Pascha "so that, partaking of them, we may be filled with [God's] gifts, ungrudgingly bestowed, and with [His] ineffable goodness" (*Book of Needs*, prayer at the blessing cheese and eggs)? How do we let our eating as well as our not eating be "to the Lord" (Rom. 14:6)?

¶ Perhaps the spiritual lessons of fasting are more obvious to us than those of feasting because the fallen state of matter is, most of the time, more obvious to us than its sanctification and redemption. And so, in fasting, we seek to free ourselves from that apostasy which has pervaded matter since the fall. We can talk all we want about how St. Paul's references to "the flesh" don't refer straightforwardly to matter or to the body as such, and we're right to do so. But St. Paul uses that potentially-confusing term because, in our daily

experience of the fallen world, "the flesh" in its Pauline sense is so bound up with our experience of matter and of our bodies. The abstinence from material goods and the denial of our bodies is a necessary step in escaping this pervasive experience of fallenness.

¶ But what about when we do begin to escape this fallen state where our material existence is pervaded by "the flesh?" Then suddenly, on Pascha night, we hear "and the Word was made flesh" (John 1:14, Gospel at Liturgy on Pascha), and we sing of "the life-bringing and buried body, even that Flesh which raiseth fallen Adam" (*Pentecostarion*, *Oikos* of Pascha). Creation, matter, flesh are revealed not in their corrupted state but in the glory of the Incarnate and Resurrected God. And He invites us not to return to our gluttonous state of fallen, "fleshly" enslavement to food, but to a new delight in the good things that He has made, that "we might. . . delight in those things that are sanctified and blessed by [Him] for the nourishment of us all. For [He is] the true Nourishment and Giver of good things" (*Book of Needs*, blessing of flesh meat). Thus fasting and feasting become not opposites, but complementary pieces of our beginning to taste and see the restoration of all things which God holds in store for the Age to Come.

¶ One way that the Church teaches us to feast properly is through the beautiful custom of **Pascha Baskets**. Following the Paschal Vigil and Liturgy, the priest blesses baskets of rich and festive food brought by the faithful, and then all share a meal of these specially blessed foods. This custom, like any, is prone to abuse: the blessing of baskets in some places comes to be emphasized more than the Liturgy itself. (The "full table" and "fatted calf" referred to by St John Chrysostom refer first of all to the Eucharist, and only secondarily to the earthly enjoyments of the Feast.) But approached in the proper spirit, after the ascetical struggles of the fast and the intense liturgical life of Holy Week, this blessing of and eating from the baskets is an

opportunity for us to see God's material blessings anew in the light of the Resurrection. This custom is primarily found in Slavic Orthodox traditions, but has had some resurgence in other parts of the Orthodox world as well.

¶ The foods in the basket are, primarily, those from which the faithful have abstained during Lent: meat, cheese, eggs, butter, etc. There are practical elements as well to the selection of foods for the basket: cured meats, cheese, and boiled eggs can sit in the basket for a few hours during the service without fear of spoilage, and then be eaten directly from the basket without the need for cooking. In principle, any food can be included. But there are items that have become traditional, and certain particular symbolism has grown up around them.

¶ The basket generally includes a **decorated candle**, which is lit during the blessing and represents the light of Christ illumining all things. It is covered with a white cloth, often festively decorated; the cloth is removed during blessing so that all of the contents can be sprinkled with holy water.

¶ A **rich bread**, generally made with egg and often sweet, forms the centerpiece of the basket. In some traditions this is referred to as *Pascha* or *Paska*; in others it is *Kulich*, a tall, cylindrical bread or cake often decorated with icing. The bread is often decorated with letters *IC XC* (an abbreviation for *Jesus Christ* in Greek) or *X B* (an abbreviation for *Christ is risen* in Slavonic). It reminds us of Christ, the "Bread of Life," in all His richness and bounty.

¶ **Eggs** have been associated with the Resurrection from the earliest times of Christianity: not only are they a rich food fitting for the feast, but they remind us of Christ coming forth from the tomb like a bird from an egg, and of our own "hatching" from death into life through Him. They are often dyed red to remind us that the Resurrection comes through Christ's blood; in some cultures they are intricately decorated with brightly-colored patterns. In many Orthodox parishes, red eggs are distributed after the Paschal Vigil.

¶ Meats, typically **ham** and **sausage**, are blessed with a special prayer that remembers the Old

Testament sacrifices of Abel and Abraham. Those sacrifices prefigured the great Sacrifice of Christ, and the meats remind us of this reality as well. The prayer also recalls the "fatted calf" from the parable of the Prodigal Son, indicating God's goodness to us who draw near to him in repentance as we have tried to do during the preceding fast.

¶ **Cheese** is specially mentioned in the prayers for the blessing of Paschal foods, with the petition (already quoted above) "that we may be filled with [God's] gifts, ungrudgingly bestowed, and with [His] ineffable goodness." Sometimes a special sweetened egg-and-cheese spread ("Cheese Pascha") is prepared and decorated with fruits and nuts.

¶ **Butter** can be decorated in festive patterns like the bread and cheese, or molded into a figure of a lamb, remembering Christ, the "Lamb of God" slain for us.

¶ Although they are acceptable Lenten foods as well, **horseradish** and **salt** are often included. The former recalls the "bitter herbs" of the Old Testament Passover, which themselves symbolized the hardship of the spiritual life; it is often mixed with beets to remind us of the Blood of Christ and His suffering on the Cross. (For all the symbolism of suffering, horseradish is also delicious on ham.) Salt represents the calling of Christians, empowered by the Resurrection, to be the "salt of the earth" (Matt. 5:13), transforming the world by making manifest the presence of Christ.

¶ **Wine** symbolizes the joy of the Heavenly Kingdom, and because it is also used in the Eucharist, it reminds us of the Blood of Christ.

¶ All of this symbolism has a larger lesson: it teaches us to see the blessings of God made manifest symbolically in all the good things of His Creation, and in the Light of His Resurrection, to make the joys of this life occasions of thanksgiving. This Pascha, with our senses purified by the struggle of the Fast, the Church invites us to see the world anew. The custom of Pascha baskets is one way of learning to accept this invitation.