

HOLY WEEK AND EASTER IN THE ORTHODOX CHURCH AND TRADITIONS THAT COME WITH THE HOLY DAYS

Dear visitors of our site, I would like to bring to your attention some centuries old traditions of the church that derived from the life of the church.

These traditions come to us in written and oral tradition from the events that took place and were recorded in the Holy Gospels, in the Apocrypha Gospels, in the history books and the traditions books. These traditions also come to us from the lives of the first Christians and martyrs of the church in the First, Second and Third century A. D.

Easter in the Orthodox Ecclesiology and church tradition is the most important feast of all the feasts. Even Saint John of Damascus at his famous hymn that we sing on Easter morning calls it: "Feast of feasts and festival of festivals". Other Holy fathers of the Church stresses the importance of the Holy Week and Easter at their homilies. The reason is that through the Crucifixion and the tomb of Christ Resurrection was promised to all his children and the kingdom of death was destroyed with His descent to the Hades.

With His Holy Resurrection the New Life started and the Gates of Paradise were opened.

SATURDAY OF LAZARUS

This is the Saturday before Palm Sunday. The church celebrates the resurrection of Lazarus, which is recorded in the Gospel. On this day, all children go to church and receive **HOLY COMMUNION**.

In the old days the children would go door to door to sing special songs for the Lazarus resurrection. This tradition also comes from the gospel saying:

"While Jesus was entering into Jerusalem the Jewish children were singing 'Osannah blessed is the one who come in the name of the Lord. Osannah to the Son of God'."

Also this act fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah who said:

"He will be recognized by the mouth of babes and children"

In the afternoon all the children and the youth gather in the church and prepare the palm crosses and decorate the church for next day with palms. Fish and wine could be consumed at lunch and at dinner-time.

PALM SUNDAY MORNING

On this day the Orthodox Church commemorates and celebrates the entrance of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ to Jerusalem. This entrance has a great importance for our salvation. He will be giving us the way to be united with Him, Last Supper. He will be betrayed. He will be put in prison. He will be judged in vain. He will suffer. He will be crucified and die for our sins. He will descend to the Hades. He will free all the righteous from there and will put an end to the kingdom of death and on the third day He will be risen from the death. But the Orthodox Church lives all these events as they are happening first time this year. Even the hymns many times mention the word today.

At the end of the Divine Liturgy the priest blesses the palms. The palms are not representing the branch of palms that the Israelites shook while Jesus entered on the back of a mule into Jerusalem by crying out the king of kings, our Lord. The palms received from the church represent that we who holds these palms, on Palm Sunday, we also receive Him in our hearts, as his children, as the Lord of Lords and the King of Kings, our Savior Jesus Christ. It is a sign of acceptance of the savior in our hearts and in our lives. The faithful take these palm branches and put them on the top of the entrance door of their home, at their car and their home icon shrine (econostasion).

Fish and wine is permitted this day. (**See Fasting**).

PALM SUNDAY EVENING

It is a matins service we celebrate Holy Monday morning service and is called the BRIDEGROOM service. The reason is that at the beginning of the service the icon of Jesus Christ suffering is placed in the middle of the solea after a solemn procession around the church. The church is the bride and the Bridegroom is Christ who is suffering and giving His Life for the salvation of the bride which is the Church, which is all those baptized in the Church and are members of His Body.

From tonight we start to fast until Easter morning which is midnight of Holy Saturday.

HOLY MONDAY - HOLY TUESDAY

In the morning of these two days, the Pre- Sanctified liturgy is performed as a vesper of the following day. People can receive **HOLY COMMUNION**, if they are prepared. In the evening though is the matins service of the bridegroom.

On Holy Tuesday the famous Hymn of Cassiani is chanted. It is a poem of repentance, which was written by a princess of Byzantium who loved very much the prince, but the prince was married to somebody else and she became none. She felt

that she sinned because she loved him so much and in order to repent she left her wealthy environment and became a nun and started the ascetic life and in the mean while she became an author of many hymns. This hymn refers to temptations and repentance.

Holy Tuesday night we read the Gospel about a woman who repented from their sins, Mary of Maghdala, came to wash with expensive annointment and with her hair the feet of Jesus Christ.

These two or three days people go for **HOLY CONFESSION** while they are **FASTING**. They are also preparing the house for Easter; they send their wishes to their friends with Easter Cards. They buy the gifts for their godchildren and grandchildren. Usually new shoes, some clothing and the decorated Easter Candle.

HOLY WEDNESDAY MORNING

On this day for the last time for the year we celebrate the Liturgy of the Pre-Sanctified gifts. Can also be performed on October 23rd Saint James feast day. On this day we do shopping for Easter meal, the necessary ingredients for the Easter cake, the eggs etc. Also we clean the house for Easter

HOLY WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON

Before going to church in the Afternoon usually we shower in order for our body to also be clean to receive the Holy Sacrament of the **HOLY UNCTION**, which is performed in every Greek Orthodox Church on Holy Wednesday afternoon. Some other Orthodox Churches (Russian, Serbian) perform Holy Unction on Holy Thursday morning. Also this sacrament has to be performed at home. By inviting the priest at home and also inviting friends of the family and this healing service is performed at the house hold the week before the Palm Sunday or Holy Monday or Tuesday.

HOLY THURSDAY MORNING

In the morning of this day, our Holy church lives the events that took place on Holy Thursday evening, the Last Supper, the prayers in the garden of Gesthemany and the betrayal by Judas Escariot.

In commemoration of the Last Supper a Divine Liturgy is performed and many people receive **HOLY COMMUNION**. Despite receiving Holy Communion they continue to fast, because next day and the following are the most important days of the Church, Good Friday and Holy Saturday.

This morning at the Orthodox household they dye the eggs for Easter. The first egg should be red and goes to the econostasion, the icon shrine of the house. About the meaning of the eggs and the red color look forward to the Easter traditions meaning.

On this day also they bake the special Easter bread called Tsoureki and other breads depends on the regional traditions of every family.

HOLY THURSDAY EVENING

At Church, the 12 Gospels are read depicting the events before and after the Crucifixion. These are called the Sacred Passion of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The family of the community as a tradition brings early of the service wreaths with flowers for the health of their families. The flowers should not have flowers with thorns like roses for example.

After the Fifth Gospel a big procession in the Church the Big Crucifix is taken around the church. Everybody kneels and the Crucifix is placed in the middle of the Solea and the wreaths are put on and round the cross. The clergy also kneel at front of the Cross and a solemn Hymn is chanted. After the reading of the gospels continue till the 12th Gospels.

These 12 gospels explain the events that took place on Good Friday morning. At the end of the service everybody in line goes to venerate the Crucifix. It is an advice to follow these services from a Holy Week Prayer Book to see and understand the wealth in the hymnology, in the theology, dogmatic and the lessons we get for our own salvation and our conduct in our daily lives.

It is an ancient Christian tradition that many people stay in Church all night until the sun rises and special mourning hymns are sung at the feet of the crucifix by people. These songs are called Christoumyrologhia. Also they decorate the Epitaphion or the real name Kouvouklion, the canopy that represents the tomb of Christ with flowers for the next day.

GOOD FRIDAY MORNING

This is the most Holy Day of all the Calendar year. The Lord suffers, is judged and is crucified. He dies on the Cross and He is buried.

On this day we do not do any special work, even we should not work neither at work, neither at home. In the morning we visit the cemeteries and bring a red egg and flowers. The priest reads prayers over the tombs. In Europe the Service of the Great Royal Hours with the Vesper of Unnailing is taking place.

In most Orthodox Churches in the Americas the Royal Hours are read at noon and the unnailing Vesper service takes place at 3 p.m. According to the Gospel writings this is the Hour that took the body of Jesus Christ down from the Cross and wrapped it in a

white linen shroud and they placed it in a new tomb and closed the door by rolling a stone.

All these accounts are written in the Gospels I detail and are read in the Church.

This day we do not even eat food with oil (**See Fasting**). It is customary to eat boiled lentil soup, which represents the tears of Virgin Mary under the Cross. Also we put vinegar in the soup, because the soldiers offered vinegar on a sponge when He was on the Cross.

In some Churches the children and the ladies go early to church to decorate the canopy which is called kouvouklion with flowers. This canopy represents the tomb of Christ.

GOOD FRIDAY AFTERNOON

It is a vesper service. In the middle of the service the Gospel is read how the body of the Lord is taken down from the Cross. And at that account the priest stops the reading and takes a new linen sheet and takes down the body of Christ and places it on the Altar Table and continues to read the Gospel and finishes it. After the petitions the iconomy called Kouvouklion is decorated with flowers and placed in the middle of the Solea and priest with the Altar boys come out of the Altar. The priest holds in His Hand the Shroud of Christ, which is called Epitaphion.

The Epitaphion is an embroidered peace of cloth that has the Body of Christ on the white linen shroud and all around the shroud are the noble Joseph, Arimathea, Virgin Mary and the myhrrbearing women, companions of Virgin Mary.

The procession takes place in the Church everybody kneels and throws petals and different aromatic colognes to the shroud when it passes from their front. With hymns the priest place the epitaphion, the shroud in the Kouvouklion, the canopy. At the end of the service every body passes by to venerate and receive a small flower. It is an old tradition for this service of unnailling that everybody, who attends the service has to bring a bouquet of flowers to the Church, to be put in the canopy, as they brought to the graves of their beloved one this morning.

Another tradition is to pass under the canopy on knees from front to back and from back to front also from left to right and from right to left. This is done for a personal health and blessing of Christ.

Another custom is to pass by 7 churches on foot and venerate their Epitaphion, which is very difficult to be done in the Americas due to the circumstances of the orthodox Churches from each other.

GOOD FRIDAY EVENING

On this great Holy Day, we give the names of the deceased and the priests read memorial prayers on the shroud of Jesus Christ. On Good Friday evening is the Funeral Service of our Lord, people hold lit candles in their hands and sing the lamentations around the shroud of Christ, in a darkened church.

At the conclusion of the Lamentation, the Canopy (and the shroud in it) is taken on the shoulders and a great funeral procession goes out of the church and around the block of the church.

The Procession makes 4 stops and at the end comes to the front door of the Church and everyone who followed the procession enters to the church by passing under the Canopy with the Kouvouklion and goes into the Church. At the end the priest takes the Epitaphion from the Canopy, Kouvouklion in his arms with Hymns and with the Big Crucifix goes to the Altar. The priest goes around three times by chanting the burial hymns of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and puts the Epitaphion on the Altar table.

The Epitaphion, the shroud, stays there until Ascension Day, which is 40 days after Easter. This act is the interment of the Body of the lord and the Gospel after that is read explains that and the service concludes. In the Conapy the icon of the Descend to the Hades is placed.

People then venerate the icon and receive a blessing from the priest and go home.

HOLY SATURDAY MORNING

On Saturday morning we celebrate the Resurrection of the righteous in the Hades. From Adam and Eve until the two persons who were crucified with Jesus Christ. All these details of the celebration are taken from the Apocrypha Gospels. The Gospel of Nicodemus, Part II The Descent of Christ into hell. In a point before the Divine Liturgy the priest throws to the air Lowell leaves, representing the resurrected souls. We have to catch them in the air as a blessing and bring them to the icon shrine at home. Also we can take some of these leaves and throw them on the tombs of our deceased ones, on Bright Friday, the Friday after Easter, as a sign of hope of the resurrection of all the faithful at the second coming.

On this day we shop everything for the Easter Luncheon and dinner and the ladies at home start cooking. Those who are going to receive communion at the Pascal Divine Liturgy should take a nap from 8p.m. to 10 p.m. and get ready and go to church for the resurrection Service. It is a custom to wear new outfits to church for Easter, representing the new life that starts with the resurrection of Christ.

HOLY SATURDAY EVENING

The Church service starts at 11 p.m. The church is dark and no light is turned on. The darkness represents the darkness of the tomb. The faithful bring or buy large Easter

Candles and hold them in their hands without lighting the. A few minutes before mid night the priest comes out of the Altar and holding a large lit candle and sings:

"Come receive the light from the unwinding light and glorify the resurrected Lord".

Everybody approaches the priest with their candles to receive the light and go outside. A big procession led by the Resurrection Banner goes out of the Church to a make shift stand. There the Gospel depicting the Resurrection is read and the Hymn of Resurrection is chanted 12 times:

"Christ is Risen from the death trampling death by death, He has bestowed life to those in the tombs".



While this hymn is chanted everybody embraces each other and says "Christ is Risen" and the other party responds "Truly He is Risen". The procession returns with Easter hymns to the Church, where the matins and the Pascal Divine Liturgy is celebrated with every body holding the light of Resurrection in their hands.

Those who are prepared receive **HOLY COMMUNION** around 1.30 a.m. and before the conclusion the priest reads a special prayer for the eggs, milk and baked lamb.

The famous **Homily of Resurrection of Saint John Chrysostom** is read and the priest distributes red eggs.

People take their candles and bring them to their home without dying them out. At the top of their door with the flame of the candle they make the sign of the Cross, as a sign of protection and blessing of the Risen Lord. Then they take the candle and put it on the Dinner table where they have a soup called magheiritsa, look at the recipes, or hot milk with the Easter tsoureki and crash eggs with each other saying Christ is Risen Truly is Risen.

Some families at 2 a.m. have full dinner. If somebody who has fasted for a long time it will be wise to eat Easter cake with hot milk and then have a rich Festal dinner the next day, which is Easter Sunday.

EASTER MORNING, AGAPE (LOVE) SERVICE

It is a Vesper service that takes place around 11 a.m. or 1 p.m. (depends upon the schedule of the particular church). At this service the Gospel reading depicts the first appearance of the Risen Lord to His Disciples.

This Gospel is read in many languages, that the Glorious resurrection of Christ to be heard to all the nations of the world. At the end of this service we distribute red eggs again. People attend this service with the Easter candles lit in their hands. Also it is a custom to bring the small children who are not able to come to church last night due to the lateness of the hour.

After the service everybody goes to their home or their friends for magheeritsa, baked lamb, which represents "The Lamb of God Who Takes Away the Sins Of The World = The Risen Jesus Christ" and many other specialties and wine. People are joyful, listen to music, dance, etc. Because the kingdom of death was conquered and their Savior, Jesus Christ is Risen from the dead as the Prophets foretold and He himself told to His disciples.

Prepared by Very Reverend Archimandrite Alexander Kile for information of our faithful and for those who joined the orthodox family through marriage,. Also for those who seek information about the traditions of the Orthodox Church in the Internet from around the world.

Reference: <http://www.stdgocunion.org/holyweek.html>