

Celebrating Our Faith

Byzantine Catholic Worship: *Our Church, Its Customs and Rich Heritage*

Христос воскрес! Воістину воскрес!
Christ is risen! Indeed He is risen!

OF ALL THE GREAT FEASTS in the Ecclesiastical Year, the most ancient, celebrated and joyous is the resplendent feast of the Resurrection of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. This festival, according to the Irmos of the eighth Ode of the Paschal Canon of the Matins of the Resurrection is “The King and Lord, the Feast of feasts, and Triumph of triumphs.”

The resurrection of Christ is incontrovertible proof of His divinity. When the Pharisees and the Scribes demanded a sign from Christ which would prove that He is the Son of God, He answered them saying that they will not receive a sign other than that of the Prophet Jonah: “For even as Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” (Matthew 12: 40) And so it happened. On the third day of His death, the glorious Resurrection took place.



The resurrection of Christ is the foundation of our faith. What meaning would Christ’s teaching have had if the resurrection, which He had so frequently predicted, had not taken place? The Apostles, when they preached the Gospel, frequently appealed to Christ’s resurrection as to the most convincing argument proving the authenticity of Christ’s doctrine. “If Christ has not risen, then,” says Paul, “is our preaching vain and vain, too, is your faith...But, as it is, Christ has risen from the dead, the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep.” (1 Corinthians 15: 14-20) For this reason, the truth of the resurrection and the Christian religion are inseparable.

The resurrection of Christ, finally, is the sure pledge of our own resurrection to a happy and everlasting life. Just as Christ rose, so too, we rise one day to a new and glorious eternal life. Christ Himself assured us of this when He said, “The hour is coming in which all who are in their graves shall hear the voice of the Son of God. And they who have done good shall come forth unto the resurrection of life; but they who have done evil unto resurrection of judgement...For this is the will of the Father Who sent Me, that whoever, beholds the Son and believes in Him, shall have everlasting life, and I will raise Him up on the last day.” (John 5: 28, 29; 6: 40)

Ukrainian Easter Traditions: The Origin of Pysanka

By Iryna Budrevych

ONE OF UKRAINE’S most famous Easter traditions is the pysanka, an intricately decorated Easter egg. The name derives from the Ukrainian verb “pysaty,” meaning “to write.” (“Pysanka” is the singular form; “pysanky” is plural.)

The origin of the pysanka dates back over ten centuries and is associated with pagan rituals and superstitions. The pysanka symbolizes the release of the earth from the shackles of winter into spring. The egg brings a promise of new hope, new life, health and prosperity. While the symbols have remained through the ages, their interpretation has changed, in an act of religious syncretism (the attempt to combine different or opposing principles and practices).



In 988 A.D., when Ukraine accepted Christianity, the decorating of eggs took on a deep religious meaning. The pysanka commemorated the Resurrection of Christ, and a promise of eternal life. The pagan superstitions were replaced by religious beliefs and legends.

The richly decorated eggs are never eaten. They are kept in the home from year to year as decorations and as protection from evil, fire and lightning. Friends exchange pysanky that have been blessed on Easter morning to represent the gift of life and to commemorate Christ’s teachings of peace and love.

Creating pysanka is an extremely complicated endeavor. The smoothest and best-shaped eggs are used to make pysanka. A stylus (kistka) is often used to ensure and perfect the clean lines and intricate patterns on the eggs. Pysanka are given to friends and are usually decorated to match the personality of the receiver.



In 2016, Canada’s Royal Canadian Mint issued a Ukrainian pysanka egg-shaped coin designed by Canadian artist Ann Morash. “This coin captures the intricate beauty of a pysanka. Every element on this Ukrainian Easter egg is rich with symbolic meaning, including the individual colours: yellow stands for youth and purity; red represents the joy and passion in life; green is the colour of spring, which brings hope and renewal; and black suggests the darkest time before dawn, and the idea of eternity.” The pysanka egg-shaped coin is a fantastic tribute to Ukrainian folk art, Easter traditions and spring!

Reflections in Christ: 4th Sunday of Pascha

HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED why the Gospel story of the healing of the paralytic was chosen for the Easter season? One understands the reasons the stories of Thomas and the Myrrh-bearers were chosen, but the paralytic? Perhaps our incomprehension is rooted in our modern separation of Pascha from baptism. In the early Church, Pascha was considered as *the* time for baptism. Even now in our Easter morning Divine Liturgy, in place of the Trisagion hymn (Holy God), we sing “All you who have been baptized into Christ, you have put on Christ.” In early tradition, Pascha meant baptism and baptism always had a paschal feel to it. The two were inextricably linked.

That might explain why all the Sunday Gospels in the Paschal season after the Sunday of the Myrrh-bearers focus upon water: the Samaritan woman finds Christ by the well, and the blind man finds salvation as he washes in the pool of Siloam. Similarly, the paralytic encounters Christ as he sat by the waters of Bethesda. In all these Gospels, we find water, a clear echo of baptism for those to whom baptism was linked with Pascha. The presumed descent of the angel into the Bethesda pool foreshadowed the spiritual and transformative power of Christian baptism.

As we examine the story in greater depth, it is important to see that in its original context the Bethesda pool was not a source of salvation for the paralytic, but a rival alternative to it, if not its positive impediment. Remember the details: the paralytic sat languishing by the pool, thirty-eight years in his wretched condition, hoping for healing. When the pool’s waters were stirred (by an angel, as everyone thought), he hoped to be the first one into the pool to soak up the angel’s divine power and be cured, but being paralyzed, he was too slow, and someone always beat him to the pool. So, he waited and waited, hoping to find salvation one day in the pool.



It was there that Jesus found him and asked him, “Do you want to be healed?” (John 5:6) He didn’t say, “Yes Lord, please heal me!” He was still hoping to get into the pool, and he answered, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is agitated, and while I am going another steps down before me.” But salvation wasn’t in the pool. It was in Jesus. Jesus simply said, “Rise, take your pallet, and walk,” and the man did. He didn’t need the pool after all. All he needed was Jesus.

In John’s subtext, the pool functions as an image of the Law and the man as an image of Israel hoping to find salvation in the Law. The paralytic had been long in his condition, even as Israel had long been waiting for divine salvation. The Bethesda pool was thought to have been stirred by an angel, even as the Law had been given by angels (Acts 7:53). The pool even had five porticoes (John 5:4), even as the Mosaic Law had five books — a detail noticed by St. Augustine. Like the paralytic who had to stop relying on the pool for salvation and turn instead to Christ, so Israel had to stop relying upon the Law to save them, and also turn to Christ. The old was giving place to the new. The paralytic found this life not in the old pool, but in the living Christ. This is the newness of Pascha, and the new life given to us in baptism. Our Paschal season reminds us that this is where we find new life and constant renewal as well.

~ Rev. Lawrence Farley

The Feast of Mid-Pentecost

DURING THE PERIOD from Easter to Pentecost, we celebrate three feasts that deserve our special attention. Two of them are common: 1) the Sunday of St. Thomas, and 2) the Ascension of Our Lord. The third one, which also deserves our attention occurring during the week after the Sunday of the Paralytic (4th Sunday of Easter) is the Mid-feast or Wednesday of Mid-Pentecost (in Ukrainian “perepolovynennya” or ‘Half-way’) — in other words, the half-way point or mid-way of the season. We celebrate the feast of Mid-Pentecost for the sake of honouring the two great feastdays — Easter and Pentecost. It has an eight day post-feast which lasts until the Wednesday after the Sunday of the Samaritan Woman.

The reason for this feast is based on the Gospel of St. John in which it is written: “When, however, the feast was already half over, Jesus went up into the temple and began to teach.” (John 7:14) There He spoke of His divine mission and of miraculous water: “My teaching is not my own, but His Who sent me...If anyone thirst, let him come to Me and drink. Whoever believes in Me, as Scripture says, “from within him there shall flow rivers of living waters.” He said this, however, of the Spirit, whom they, who believed in Him, were to receive. (John 7: 16, 37-39)

The feast of Mid-Pentecost aims to strengthen our faith in the risen Christ, to inspire us to observe the commandments of God and to predispose us for the feast of the Ascension of our Lord and the Descent of the Holy Spirit (Pentecost). In the Matins service of that day at the Sticheras of Praises we sing: “Brethren, having been enlightened by the resurrection of the Saviour Jesus Christ, and having reached the half-way mark of the feast of the Lord, let us sincerely observe the commandments of God, so that we may become worthy to celebrate the Ascension and receive the coming of the Holy Spirit.”

Ascension Thursday

THE FEAST OF THE LORD’S ASCENSION always falls on a Thursday, on the fortieth day after Christ’s resurrection. This is one of the principal feastdays of our Lord and therefore, has a post-feast of nine days. It celebrates the memory of Christ’s Ascension into heaven and underscores its significance for Christ and for us. St. John Chrysostom, in his homily on the Ascension says: “Today the human race is completely reconciled with God. The ancient battle and enmity have disappeared. We, who were unworthy to live even on earth — are now lifted up to heaven. Today we become heirs to the kingdom of heaven, we, who do not even deserve earth, we ascend to heaven and inherit the throne of the King and Lord. Human nature, against which the cherubim guarded paradise, is now raised up above all the cherubim.” The Ascension became a universal feast in the fourth century, celebrated everywhere. The Church rejoices at the glory of Christ, now seated at the right hand of the Father. He ascended into heaven, in order to send us the Comforter — the Holy Spirit, and to “prepare a place for us” as He promised.

