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Lest We Forget: Keeping Traditions (Virginia Nieuwsma)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



To hear Mother Victoria of the St. Barbara's Monastery tell it, growing up in the Ukrainian Orthodox Church was a rich and memorable experience at special times of year. On Christmas Eve, for instance, she remembers looking for the first star in the sky, which would signal the start of the Nativity meal. Before eating, she and her family always fed the animals first, in honor of their role on the night of Christ's birth. Then the family would go to the table, where the meal consisted of twelve dishes ranging from appetizers to desserts, all honoring the Twelve Apostles. Under the tablecloth, her mother would place straw or hay as a reminder of the manger, and they would interrupt their meal from time to time to sing a carol.

We are all familiar with the Holy Tradition, of course, which is composed of our liturgies, the Scripture, the Ecumenical Councils, the writings of the Fathers and Mothers of the Church, the body of doctrines we subscribe to, and the teachings about fasting and feasts. These are traditions with a capital "T." Yet also woven into the tapestry of our vibrant Faith, are numerous small "t" traditions practiced by faithful Orthodox down through the centuries. Layer upon layer, these have been added, differing from culture to culture and evolving over time. We bless fruit at Transfiguration, decorate with flowers in our homes and churches on special days, bake and eat breads which hide pennies, cross ourselves before leaving our homes or going to bed, bake prosphera according to certain prayers and instructions, dispose of icons using certain guidelines.

Why do we do these things? What difference does it make whether our dyed eggs on Pascha are red or blue? What meaning is there to eating a special recipe in remembrance of our departed loved ones? And why should we teach our children what these things mean?

A Vote for Our Ancestors

An old African saying declares, "To go back to tradition is the first step forward." Or as English writer G.K. Chesterton was fond of saying, tradition is giving our ancestors a vote. Nothing inverts today's conventional wisdom more than insisting that people who've lived before us, might actually have known things that we need to know. In our day, old age is a trial to be feared and avoided, through plastic surgery if necessary; youthful voices clamor loudly, and we place our trust in instant information from the internet and current scientific and psychological dogma.

If we don't listen to the voices of the past, we lose a great deal. The Church restores this wisdom to us, about life, eternity, what matters most, and how best to spend our time. We must be active in our efforts to hand down the faith to the next

generation, for strengthening the link between the past and the future is the best way to guarantee that our kids will know what is important and what ought to be cherished.

Building Blocks for Life

“These customs and traditions serve life,” writes Mary Paloumpis Hallick, “contribute to it, build it, and are to be maintained and upheld. It is these customs that provide a distinct identity to each group...they are our treasures...to be guarded, protected, proclaimed and passed on to generations to come.” As human beings, we crave events to anticipate, and our glad expectation sparks joy and creativity. In Orthodoxy, our lives and memories are built from event to event, in a cycle that repeats itself and never gets old. Children, especially, but adults too, thrive on routine; when we repeat traditions, we build into our families a sense of safety and security. Mother Victoria knew that every Nativity, her family would eat with straw under the tablecloth, remembering the place of Christ’s birth, and that made everything much more memorable.

Through keeping traditions, we also are given the tools for building community within our parish. At St. Basil this year, we received a visit from St. Nicholas himself! If we repeat that tradition in years to come, it will become a part of the fabric of Christmas for our children, and a part of their happy memories. Celebrating the liturgy together is foundational to the life of a parish, but in our disconnected and hectic culture, we need other activities to keep us united—we need to mourn together, pray together, rejoice together. Traditions give us the tools in which to do this.

Redeeming the Time

Kathleen Norris says in her book, *The Quotidian Mysteries*, “We want life to have meaning, we want fulfillment, healing, and even ecstasy, but the human paradox is that we find these things by starting where we are, not where we wish we were. We must look for blessings to come from unlikely, everyday places—out of Galilee, as it were—and not in spectacular events, such as the coming of a comet.”

What do our days consist of? We rise and dress, perhaps say our prayers, feed our kids, take them to school or take care of them at home, go to an office, turn our computers on and do some work, break for lunch, pick up clothes at the cleaners, shop for groceries, prepare more meals, talk on the phone, take a shower, prepare for bed. While this cycle can be punctuated from time to time by drama, such as a loved one’s wedding or illness, we must admit that ordinary moments make up the bulk of our lives. But when we light a candle, or knead communion bread in our kitchen, sing a festal song in honor of a saint, or bless our loved ones with the sign

of the cross as we leave the house, we turn ordinary moments into sacramental ones. In this way, we pray by doing, and remind all around us in the family that the Holy Spirit is everywhere and fills all things. We don't need to wait for the spectacular to redeem our time, but we can sanctify each hour through keeping the traditions of the Church.

Take the baking of prosphera, for example. Why go through so much trouble to make bread for church when it could be mass produced, or we could just run to the store before Church on Sunday morning? Women who bake prosphera express how they sense the presence of Christ in the kitchen, as they mix flour, salt, yeast and water, knead it and form it into loaves, impress it with the holy seal, and wait for it to bake while the fresh bread fragrance fills the house. Here is a way to pray with our hands, our everyday ingredients.

In life, each step we take forms us. The small, daily traditions we embrace help guide us down the straight path. Prayer in the morning brings refreshment. Blessing our children as they leave for school keeps the angels close to them. Singing the Lord's Prayer together before meals, all of these things—the supposed little things done every day, provide us and our children a secure and familiar road, leading to heaven.

By Virginia Nieuwsma

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