

A Beautiful and Inspiring Christmas Tradition from Eastern Europe

Among Catholic families in Poland, Lithuania, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, the start of the traditional Wigilia (Christmas Eve Vigil) meal begins with the **Oplatki**, Oblatky, or Plotkele, a thin Communion-like rectangular wafer made of unleavened bread and stamped with different Christmas symbols. Some families call it the “bread of Love” and it is widely known in English-speaking countries simply as the Christmas wafer. Some eastern German families are also known to use a wafer called Opladen in their Christmas cooking.

Oplatki symbolizes the Bread of Life



Bread is one of the most ancient and simple of all human foods. It has been a symbol of life and of hope for millennia. As Catholics we recall that God sent manna to His people as they wandered

in the Sinai desert. Bethlehem, where the Savior was born, means “house of bread” in Hebrew. We also recall that Jesus said “I am the bread of life,” and that He left us His Body and Blood under the appearances of bread and wine in the Eucharist. Blessed bread, associated with Mass and yet distinct from the Eucharist, has long been used as a sacramental in both the Eastern and Western Christian traditions.

In the West, the custom lives on in the *pain benit* (blessed bread) given in some French churches after High Mass. In the East, the use of blessed bread developed into the practice of *antidoron*. Some of the bread prepared for Mass (the *prospora*, or offerings) is not consecrated, but is used for a kind of spiritual communion. The blessed bread is given out at the end of the Liturgy and as a gift to those who may not be able to receive the Eucharist. This practice still continues in the Byzantine Rite, but usually only on major feasts.

In the Latin Rite, the bread and wine offered at Mass are referred to as *oblata* (offerings). It is from the Latin word *Oblata* that the Polish word *Oplatki* and the Slovak word *Oblatky* is derived. The



The Lithuanian word *Plotkele* has the same origin, but due to something called “vocal shift” in the Lithuanian language the name has changed slightly. While the source of the name is derived from the Latin, the religious custom of special wafers at Christmas is shared by both the Latin and the Byzantine traditions.

The *Oplatki* tradition developed from earlier Christian traditions, such as the *antidoron*, in the Kingdom of Poland not long after Christianity came to the country in 966. The custom was adopted later by the Lithuanian, Czech and Slovak peoples and has made its way into countless other households who find that its rich symbolism is an easily adoptable Christmas custom which also carries profound meaning for Christians.

Poles, Slovaks, Czechs and Lithuanians are fortunate in preserving such a meaningful custom at Christmas, as an aid to a worthy reception of Holy Communion and as a family spiritual communion on this most joyous of Christian feasts. It is customary to have the Christmas wafers blessed by the parish priest prior to Christmas Eve and many parishes provide the *Oplatki* for their parishioners.

Christmas Eve – Vigil of Christ's Birth



Following time-honored tradition, many families will begin their Christmas Eve celebration by waiting for the appearance of the first star in the early evening sky as they look toward the East. This first star appearing symbolizes the Star of Bethlehem which announced that the Great Light was coming into our world, to the “people who lived in darkness.”

The table at which the family gathers for the Christmas Eve dinner typically has some straw

strewn beneath a fine white tablecloth to commemorate the birth of the Christ Child in the manger or cave where the animals lived. A more modern adaptation includes the use of straw or sprigs of evergreen which are placed on a serving platter and then covered with a fine white napkin on which the Oplatki wafers rest.

The Christmas Eve meal begins with the eldest member of the family taking an Oplatek wafer, breaking it and sharing it the family member next to them. Each then shares pieces of the Oplatek wafer with everyone else present at the table. Some families, particularly of the Slovak tradition, share the Oplatek with honey on it, as a symbol of the sweetness and joy of the occasion. The sharing-ritual is accompanied by embracing and the exchange of good wishes. The symbolism of sharing the wafer to each person, and then back and forth, symbolizes the giving and the sharing in our lives.\

Signs and Symbols

Following the sharing of Oplatki comes the evening meal. The meal is meatless (even free of meat drippings or meat stock) and symbolizes the cleansing effect of abstinence in preparation for the coming of Christ. Among Catholics in the East, a period of fasting and abstinence is observed during Advent. The variety and abundance of what is served during the Christmas Vigil dinner makes this anything but a penitential one though.

The Christmas Eve meal typically begins with a simple soup. The most common is a clear beet broth with tiny mushroom-filled dumplings floating within or a clear mushroom soup served over egg noodles. A mushroom and potato soup is also common. The fish which anchor the meal have long been a symbol of Christianity. Most commonly pike or carp is served. The head of the pike, when dismembered, contains bones in the shape of a cross, ladder and nails – the tools of Christ's crucifixion. Horseradish is often thought to be a reminder of life's bitterness, while honey represents its sweetness and the poppy seeds its tranquility.

Other dishes include sauerkraut stewed with mushrooms and/or peas, perogi with various

meatless fillings – both savory or sweet, buckwheat groats and mushroom gravy, golabki (cabbage rolls) filled with rice or barley and mushrooms.

Rounding out the meal are such varied sweet dishes as almond soup, cranberry jelly, stewed prunes and dried fruit, noodles and poppy seed, wheat and honey pudding, rice and apple casserole plus nuts, raisins, dates and figs to snack on. Traditional cakes include poppy seed rolls, fruit cakes, and honey-spice cake. Some families serve a dessert or a drink which is made of 12 different fruits to honor Christ's Twelve Apostles. Although drinking is rather subdued, often krupnik (a hot honey-spice cordial) is served.

Singing koledy (Christmas carols) has long been the crowning touch of the Christmas Eve Vigil celebration. The family moves to where the Christmas tree stands, lights its tapers and joyously sings the age-old hymns in honor of the Savior's birth.

Cycle of Life



The order in which the courses of the evening meal are served signify human life and its natural cycles – honey on the Christmas wafer followed by sour potatoes or tart soup, and fish, then

pastries – the sweet, the sour, and the sweet againthat is the order of our human life on earth, from joy to sorrow and back again. As Christians we live in Hope, for God's mercy to us and for the hope of ultimate Joy in Heaven which is our reward for a life well-lived. The beauty and rich symbolism of the Christmas wafer tradition offers us a profound, yet simple, lesson for our Christian life.

You may buy packages of [Oplatki Christmas wafers](#), with a handy informative booklet, from October through December.

Material for this article has been gathered from several sources including: *The Slovak Heritage Society*, the *Polish Geneology Research website*, *Rootsweb Lithuania*, *Wikipedia*, *Fr. George Franko of Holy Name Slovak Catholic Church* and others.