

# CENTER FOR FAMILY CARE - FAMILY CONNECTIONS

## Sharing Our Faith Traditions

by Despina Manatos

When I was in 1st grade, I remember my mother coming to my classroom after the New Year with a Vasilopita. She explained the tradition to my class, cut pieces of the bread for everyone, and my classmate who found the coin in his bread, received a blessing for the New Year. I remember thinking it was pretty cool that she shared this fun tradition from our faith and culture with my teacher and my friends. I was very proud that they found my Greek Orthodox tradition so interesting and were very enthusiastic to learn about it.

Now that I am a parent, I find it extremely important that my generation continues to pass on such meaningful traditions of our faith and culture to our children. Furthermore, I feel like we need to share them with others in order for us to stay connected to our roots and facilitate our children's pride in their heritage. Therefore, I always ask parents, are we doing the best we can to keep in touch with our roots and share our faith and traditions with others? How can we do this throughout the year and not merely by inviting our friends to our annual church festival?

Think about this: We all have family members or friends who married someone outside the Orthodox faith. It is always nice to share our wedding traditions (the koufeta, the koumbari, the stefana, etc.) with the new spouse and his

or her family. People of other faiths love our traditions because they are steeped in religious meaning and significance. The programs at weddings often explain the intricacies of the Orthodox wedding and the non-Orthodox guests appreciate the explanation. How proud we are to tell others that we are crowned as king and queen of our home with the stefana? It is so beautiful, and it is a part of the wedding ceremony that people love to learn about and witness.

So, let's continue to communicate the rich meanings behind the things we celebrate in the Greek Orthodox faith. Here are three traditions we should be observing, explaining, and sharing with others whenever the opportunity presents itself: 1)

– **Name days:** Our children need to know that they have a name day! They also need to know something about the life of the saint or the story of the feast on the day which they celebrate. Every family should decide how to celebrate name days and our children ought to look forward to them just as they do their birthdays. We should even be teaching our children the name days of other family members and encourage them to give them a call to say "Chronia Polla."

In our schools, when asked about our culture and what kinds of things our children celebrate, we should take that opportunity to explain about name days to the class. The teacher could even provide a list of the names of the children in

the class and we can try to find a name day that corresponds to each name. Kids would love to learn their Orthodox name day! We can even teach the class how to write "Chronia Polla" in Greek. I think our children would be very proud to share this special tradition with their classmates. I can just hear the kids at school telling our kids, "Wow, it is so cool that you get to have a birthday and a name day! Do you get presents for both?"

– **Vasilopita:** Just as my mother brought a Vasilopita to class many years ago, we can also do the same. In a demonstration to the class, we should first tell the children the story of the Vasilopita. I like explaining that the translation of Vasilopita is "Basil's sweet bread" honoring the saint remembered in this treasured tradition.

There are many versions of how and why Saint Basil put the coins into sweet bread, but the most common story is that he was trying to secretly distribute money to the poor. There is also a special order of the cutting of the bread that is followed: Jesus Christ, the Theotokos, Saint Basil, and the Church or the poor. Then, it is cut for the family members, oldest to youngest. As we demonstrate this in class, we can adapt it by starting with the principal or the teacher, then the classroom, then the oldest student to the youngest. Don't forget to mention that the person who receives the coin in his bread is said to be blessed in the year ahead.

This is an easy tradition for us to share

with others, and if it cannot be done at school, maybe you can invite some of your children's friends over after the New Year and have a special cutting of the Vasilopita.

– **Cracking eggs at Pascha:** The Greek name for this game is "tsougrisma" meaning clinking together. At a spring event of your child's class, bring some red hard boiled eggs. Next, explain the rules of breaking Pascha eggs to the students and start playing until the last uncracked egg (and winner) is standing.

We all know how exciting breaking eggs can be in our own house at Pascha each year so the kids at school will definitely enjoy this game. To make it even more fun, offer a prize for the winner. This past Pascha, my son created a throne for the champion egg by turning a Styrofoam cup over and poking a hole into the bottom. The champion egg was placed on the throne for everyone to admire.

I know there are many more unique aspects of our faith and culture that we can share with others. I encourage you to keep adding to this list and paying more attention to what we Orthodox celebrate. Let's make a point of sharing our traditions so our children can be proud and most importantly, so our wonderful traditions live on.

*Despina Manatos is the author of "The Name Day Book," which can be purchased from the Department of Religious Education. Despina is an English teacher and attends St. Barbara Church in Toms*

### FAMILY QUOTES

*Brethren, you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.*

–Ephesians 2:19-22; 3:1-7

*It is of great significance if there is a person who truly prays in a family. Prayer attracts God's Grace and all the members of the family feel it, even those whose hearts have grown cold. Pray always.*

– Elder Thaddeus of Vitovnica, *Our Thoughts Determine Our Lives: The Life and Teachings of Elder Thaddeus of Vitovnica* (Compiled by the St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood)

*The bodies of fellow human beings must be treated with greater care than our own. Christian love teaches us to give our brethren not only spiritual gifts, but material gifts as well. Even our last shirt, our last piece of bread must be given to them. Personal almsgiving and the most wide-ranging social work are equally justifiable and necessary. The way to God lies through love of other people and there is no other way. At the Last Judgment I shall not be asked if I was successful in my ascetic exercises or how many prostrations I made in the course of my prayers. I shall be asked, did I feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and the prisoners: that is all I shall be asked.*

– St. Maria Skobtsova of Paris, *Pearl of Great Price: The Life of Mother Maria Skobtsova 1891-1945* by Sergei Hackel



### A PRAYER FOR THE NATIVITY FAST

*Lord Jesus, You have come so many times to us and found no resting place, forgive us for our overcrowded lives, our vain haste and our preoccupation with self. Come again, O Lord, and though our hearts are a jumble of voices, and our minds overlaid with many fears, find a place however humble, where You can begin to work Your wonder as you create peace and joy within us. If in some hidden corner, in some out-of-the-way spot, we can clear away the clutter, and shut out the noise and darkness, come be born again in us, and we shall kneel in perfect peace with the wisest and humblest of men.*

*Help us to enter into this Christmas Fast with humility, yet with joy. And finally Lord, give us Christmas from within, that we may share it from without, on all sides, all around us, wherever there is need. God help us, every one, to share the blessing of Jesus, in whose name we keep Christmas holy. Amen.*

– From Daily Meditations and Prayer for the Christmas Advent Fast and Epiphany by Presbytera Emily Harakas and Fr. Anthony Coniaris.

### Arming Our Children

*"My children look forward to being 'armed for battle' every morning. I make the sign of the cross with holy oil on their foreheads; their armor. I give them each a piece of antidoro (take an extra piece on Sunday and cut into small pieces for the rest of the week) and a sip of holy water; their strength. And we double check to make sure they have their weapons; their cross and prayer rope. Then we leave for school and I have the peace of mind knowing that God and His holy Mother and all the saints are surrounding my children with their protection."*

– From *Spiritual Inheritance* by Sylvia Leontaritis (Family Connections, September 2011).

Family Connections is a ministry of the Center for Family Care of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.

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