Blessing of Easter Foods

The practice of the blessing of food is rooted in deeply held Christian beliefs. Think about it: we ask God’s blessing on our food all the time.  The traditional Catholic blessing says it clearly: “Bless us, O Lord, and these Thy gifts which we are about to receive through Christ Our Lord.  Amen.” The last familiar words of the prayer, “through Christ Our Lord,” are the key to understanding the blessing of food on Holy Saturday.  The blessing imparted is always through Christ by the power of His Passion, Death and Resurrection.

We believe that all creation is good because it comes from the hands of God.  His creation is entrusted to us for our well-being. Consequently, we are called to be good and wise stewards of it.  We also believe that sin entered into the world with the original sin of Adam and Eve.  The Lord Himself, to save us from sin and darkness, entered into our created world as the Word Incarnate.  By His saving sacrifice on the cross and his life-giving Presence, Jesus Christ sanctifies all of creation.  To continue this sanctification of people and all of creation, He entrusted to the Church the seven Sacraments which are real encounters with Him and communicate His life.  By the Sacred Liturgy of the Church, He also provides for the blessing of persons, places, and things so that they be reclaimed by Him and consecrated to Him.

That brings us back to Holy Saturday and our Easter baskets.  The foods we eat at Easter are blessed to commemorate His dynamic act of salvation, His Passion, Death, and Resurrection.  We eat these blessed foods to break our Lenten fast so that we might joyfully remember that He is risen, alive and with us.

Let’s look at which foods typically fill the baskets to be blessed.

Maslo (Butter) – Usually butter is shaped into a figure of the Paschal Lamb (Christ Himself) or of a three-barred cross.  A small banner with a cross may be placed on the Lamb. On the cross may be placed five peppercorns or five cloves symbolizing the wounds that Jesus suffered on the cross.  This figure shows us the Lamb slain (Rev 13:8) who is the Victor over sin and death.

Babka (Easter Bread) – A sweet, yeast bread rich in eggs, butter and other condiments, it is a symbol of Christ Himself, who is our True Bread come down from heaven (Jn 6:32).  Usually it is baked as a round loaf with a golden crust decorated with some symbol indicative of Christ, such as a braided cross, a lamb or something similar.

Jajka (eggs) and Pisanki (decorated with symbols of Easter)  - These are highly decorated eggs with symbols and markings made with beeswax.  They are symbolic of hope, new life and a reminder of Jesus’ Resurrection (Jn 11:25). Often family members with these hard-boiled eggs in hand will strike one against another while saying, “Christ is risen, Alleluia!  He is truly risen, Alleluia, Alleluia!”.  The cracked eggshell is symbol of the opened tomb of the Lord at His Resurrection.

Szynka (Ham) Kielbasa (sausage) - These foods are a reminder that the Old Law that forbade their consumption is now fulfilled in the New Law and belief in the Resurrection of Christ. (Acts 10-11-17)

Chleb (Bread) – This type of “regular” bread is symbolic of new life and a reminder of Jesus the Bread of Life who is really and substantially present in the Holy Eucharist (Mt 26:26)

Chrzan (horseradish) – Is a reminder of the original Passover Supper that used bitter herbs showing the bitter life of the Jewish people in Egypt.  It also reminds us of the bitter agony suffered by Our Lord during His Passion. (Ex 12:8)

Sol (salt) – Salt is a fundamental seasoning and used as preservative.  As a condiment used for flavor, it reminds Christians of our duties towards others and to “flavor” the world with faith in Christ.  Jesus said to his disciples in the Gospel, “You are the salt of the earth.” (Mt 15:13)

Ser (cheese) – A custard type cheese shaped into a ball which has a bland but sweet taste.  It is indicative of the moderation that Christians should have in all things.  It is a reminder that the world through which we journey is bland compared to the sweetness of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Makowiec (poppyseed roll) – This sweet delicacy calls to mind the sweetness of knowing Christ and taking His easy yoke upon our shoulders. (Mt 11:28-30)

Candle - A candle that is lighted is often attached to the basket serving as s rich symbol of Christ whose Resurrection illumines our heart and all of creation.   He says, “I am the light of the world.  Whoever follow me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. “ (Jn 8:12)  It remind us of the Paschal Candle that is blessed and lighted with the  fire kindled and blessed at the celebration of the Easter Vigil.

Colorful Ribbons and Sprigs of Greenery – These are attached to the basket as signs of joy and new life in the season of spring and in celebration of the Resurrection of our Lord.

Linen Cover – This cover is often beautifully embroidered with Christian symbols such as the Paschal Lamb or a cross and may be passed down from generation to generation.  When it is drawn back to expose the food to be blessed, it reminds us of the shroud being cast off by Our Lord at the moment of His Resurrection. (Jn 20:2-7)

Coming to the parish church on Holy Saturday with our basket laden with Easter food is a sacred pilgrimage.  We come to seek Christ’s blessing bestowed by the priest who is configured to Him.  Often in the church is found the “Tomb of the Lord” in which an image of Jesus recumbent awaiting the moment of the glory of His rising again.  It is custom after the blessing of the food to go to the tomb with great solemnity to meditate on the love that caused the Lord Jesus to suffer death for our salvation.  It is also a time to pray all of the deceased members of our families and all of the souls in Purgatory.

With the joy of the Resurrection filling our hearts, we remember with gratitude all of the gifts that God has given us.  This makes us realize that we are called to share His bounty with those who are in need.  Often in churches there will be receptacle in which each family is asked to put some of their blessed food for the poor.  What a wonderful reminder that our love for God urges us on to love one another!  We love our brothers and sisters because God has so loved us!

So we see, that the blessing of Easter foods is indeed a Pittsburgh thing. But his blessed custom also has deep and ancient roots that draw meaning from the Gospel that proclaims the Paschal Mystery of the Lord that promises us eternal life!

So, let’s prepare our baskets and go to church to find Our Lord waiting for us who extends His abundant blessing through the hands of His priest!  How amazing is that!