



Oplátky

The Christmas Wafer An Eastern European Custom For all Christians



The Oplatek, for the Polish people is the most important element in the Christmas celebration. It is an important part of the family rites at the Wigila, or Vigil Supper on Christmas Eve and is used by friends and neighbors at parties and gatherings all during the holiday season.

The Oplatek, is the Polish Bread-of-Love for Christmas Eve. It symbolizes days of harmony, when what is to be forgiven is forgiven and what is to be forgotten is forgotten. The sharing of the Oplatek signifies that everyone in the universe is related...we are all God's holy children...we all have His Divine power to love!

The Oplatek, an unleavened wheat wafer, like those used for Holy Communion in church, has for all Poles a mystical meaning, which cannot be explained. At Christmas time it is even enclosed in Christmas cards and sent to absent members of the family and to close friends separated by distance, to draw them close in a spiritual union with their loved ones. To receive a piece of Oplátky is a special blessing. It says that the recipient is loved in a holy way and that the choicest blessings are prayed over them and for them!

At the Wigilia, the rite of sharing and breaking the Oplatek is both simple and moving. The host and hostess first share the Oplatek with each other and then with all the members of their family and guests. With the breaking, good wishes, blessings and prayers are exchanged and shared. It is a time of spiritual gift-giving. A small portion of the wafer (pink) and of the Christmas dinner foods is also shared with the animals of the house!

If you have forgotten this beautiful old custom in your family, why not revive it again this year and if you have never practiced this tradition of love, why not try it this year?

FAMILY PRAYERS BEFORE SHARING THE CHRISTMAS WAFER

The Vigil Supper of Christmas Eve begins anytime after the youngest child or family member has sighted the first star. Family and guests gather around the table, which is covered with a white cloth under which is placed a symbolic amount of hay. This reminds us of the manger in which the Christ child was laid. The centerpiece of the table is a small tray or plate on which a white napkin has been placed together with the wafers (opiatki) and sometimes even the figure of the baby Jesus from the family nativity set. There should also be candles on the table proclaiming Jesus Christ is the "Light of the World."

Youngest: It is here! The first star has appeared! I have seen it!

(The candles on the wigilia table are now lit, as the head of the family continues:)

Leader: On this year's shortest of days and longest of nights, a star appears shining in the darkness. For on this night, "The Word was made flesh..."

All: "And dwelt among us!"

Leader: "Bóg się rodzi!" God is born! Proclaims the majestic Christmas carol. Jesus, Son of God, is born of Mary. For this night, "The Word was made flesh..."

All: "And dwelt among us!"

Leader: The star has appeared announcing His birth. The star of Bethlehem guides the three wise men in their search for the new-born King. For this night, "The Word was made flesh..."

All: "And dwelt among us!"

Leader: This night a child is born to us, a Son is given to us. His name is Wonderful, Counselor, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. For on this night, "The Word was made flesh..."

All: "And dwelt among us!"

Leader: Throughout the ages on this eve, as the first star appeared, our ancestors throughout the world celebrated with joy, this Vigil Supper or Wigilia, as we do today. For on this night, "The Word was made flesh..."

All: "And dwelt among us!"

Leader: Our forefathers celebrated this evening with the breaking of bread, the opiatek. Reverently, we do the same and share this sacred heritage. The Christmas wafer is similar to the bread used in church. In the sharing of this meal and breaking of this bread, Jesus is born for us this evening, around this table, under this roof, in our hearts. Let us now listen to the story of his birth as recounted by the evangelist Luke:

(Luke 2/1-14 is read here)

Leader: At this feast we share the joy of heaven. We rejoice with the holy family; having sighted the first star we gather at this table to hear glad tidings of comfort and joy. Summoned to the festival we break bread. We share the holy wafer. The breaking of this bread brings with it a promise of reconciliation and peace. As we share it with each other, we are bound to forgive each other all the wrongs we have done in the past, and never return to them. Through forgiveness the Lord is born in our family, as Bethlehem, "The House of Bread," happens once again among us. For this reason the holy wafer is called the "bread of love." Glory to God in Highest Heaven! And peace...

All: Peace to his people on earth!

(The wafer is now shared as greetings are exchanged)