



'Taste and see that the Lord is good': Food in Orthodox Christianity

Elizabeth Theokritoff

Requests for use or re-publication of this article should be made (via Shap if necessary) to the writer, who retains copyright. If re-published in part or full elsewhere, the article's publication in *World Religions in Education* 2009 should be acknowledged.

The transliteration of specialist terms and the opinions expressed in this article are those of the writer, not of the Shap Working Party.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Theokritoff is a freelance theological translator and independent scholar. She is co-editor of the *Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, and her articles have appeared in a number of journals. She has served as visiting lecturer at the Institute of Orthodox Christian Studies in Cambridge.

ABSTRACT

The author discusses the importance of food in the Orthodox Church, which reminds us that nothing is too ordinary to be part of spiritual life. Eating as a fundamental metaphor for our relationship with God goes right back to the creation story. The symbolism of eucharistic bread, the meaning of fasting, and the liturgical usages and foods associated with services and feast days are also discussed.

Introduction: food and faith

The significance of food in the Christian faith is hard to overestimate. Jesus Christ speaks of himself as 'bread' (John 6:35ff). He is identified with the Passover lamb, whose blood saved the people of Israel from the angel of death (1 Corinthians 5:7, cf. John 1:29). And the central act of Christian worship is the Eucharist, the celebration of Christ's last supper with his disciples before his crucifixion, at which he gives his disciples bread and wine saying 'This is my body... this is my blood'.

In the Orthodox Christian understanding, eating as a fundamental metaphor for our relationship with God goes right back to the creation story. Almost the first instructions given to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden concern food: they were given 'every tree' to eat, apart from one (Genesis 1:29, 2:16-17). 'Every tree', according to early Christian writers, signifies that eating was meant to be a way of nourishing ourselves on God who is all in all, partaking in His life. But instead, Genesis describes humans eating against God's will, outside a relationship with Him (see Genesis 3:6). Food becomes an end in itself.

Eucharist and unity

The first accounts of Christian worship describe communities meeting to 'break bread'. This is the earliest form of the Eucharist: bread and wine are offered back to God in thanksgiving (Greek 'eucharistia') for all his gifts, before being distributed.



For Orthodox Christians, now as then, communion (i.e. 'partaking') in the Eucharist is the way in which those who believe in Christ are nourished by him. While the physical process of eating is obviously the same as at an ordinary meal, the effect, according to Christian belief, is the reverse: instead of the food becoming incorporated into us, when we receive the 'body of Christ' we become incorporated into him. In the words of one of the Eucharistic prayers, Christ is always being eaten yet is never consumed, but sanctifies those who partake in him.¹ To help prepare for this sanctification, communicants other than small children keep a total fast, eating and drinking nothing from midnight.

From the beginning, the celebration of the Eucharist was intimately connected with the unity of the Church: 'we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread' (1 Corinthians 10:17). Reception of communion is not seen primarily as a relationship between Christ and the individual; being incorporated into Christ means by definition becoming part of his body, and his body is the Church. This helps explain why the Orthodox Church does not practice 'inter-communion' with other denominations in the absence of full unity.

The Eucharistic bread, known as 'prosfora' (offering), is usually prepared by members of the congregation: this is an important way in which the laity participate in the Eucharistic offering. Depending on local tradition, one large loaf or five smaller loaves are used. Each loaf is formed from two pieces of dough pressed or kneaded together into one, symbolising the two natures of Christ who is both God and man. The prosfora is marked with a seal, from which the celebrant will cut sections representing Christ (the 'Lamb', the part actually used for communion), Mary the Mother of God, the saints and angels and living and departed members of the Church. Those who offer prosfora loaves usually include a list of people to be prayed for; particles representing all those commemorated are put into the consecrated cup after communion, so that they too participate in Christ's sacrifice. In Russian use, people submit small loaves which are returned to them; the bread is often shared with the sick or housebound whose names have been commemorated.

At the end of the Divine Liturgy, the remainder of the prosfora which has not been consecrated is cut up and distributed to all the congregation. As a gesture of hospitality, non-Orthodox visitors are usually encouraged to receive a piece. This bread is called 'antidoron', meaning 'instead of the [Eucharistic] gift'.

Feasting and fasting

The church year is dominated by cycles of feasting and fasting. Although people vary in the strictness with which they keep the fasts, few ignore them altogether.

Fast days, on which we abstain from meat and animal products, usually fish and often oil, make up about half the year. They include almost every Wednesday and Friday, in commemoration of Christ's betrayal and crucifixion. Easter is preceded by the great Lenten fast of six weeks, plus Holy Week; Christmas is similarly preceded by a six-week fast, and shorter fasts precede the Dormition of the Mother of God (15 August) and Saints Peter and Paul (19 June). During fasting periods, families do not usually alter the pattern of mealtimes, but the practice in monasteries is considerably more rigorous, and periods such as the first three days of Lent or Good Friday are kept as a total fast by those who are able.

The Orthodox fasting discipline has a somewhat different emphasis from the Western Christian practice of 'giving something up for Lent': we do not choose what to give up, but are obedient to the practice of the church community. We begin Lent by recalling the Fall, the act of eating from the tree of disobedience; the fast is the road back to paradise, as our eating becomes

¹ The Divine Liturgy of our Father among the Saints John Chrysostom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995)



once more part of a relationship with God. We are often reminded that fasting should be inseparable from prayer and almsgiving: it is not primarily about food, but about re-focussing our attention on God and our neighbour.

Easter is the 'feast of feasts', attended by food to match. Red eggs, symbolic of the sealed tomb from which Christ rose, are distributed at the midnight service, and people crack them together wishing each other 'Christ is risen!' In Russian practice, people bring baskets of festive foods to be blessed by the priest before serving to break the fast; these include a cheese cake called 'paskha' ('Easter') and rich breads, decorated with the initials of 'Christ is risen'. In Greek and Middle Eastern use, the fast is broken with roast lamb or goat, in obvious reference to the Passover lamb.

Food and community

The bonding of shared meals is a constant in human cultures. It is a notable feature of Orthodox Christian practices, however, that food connects us not only with those visibly present but also with those gone before us, with the entire Church through the ages. Most Orthodox communities, for instance, offer boiled wheat at memorial services for the departed – recalling Christ's saying that a grain of wheat must fall to earth and die in order to bear fruit (John 12:24). After the service, the wheat mixture is distributed to the congregation, who pray for the departed as they partake.

Wheat or bread also serve to connect us with the saints, those departed who are recognised by the Church as a whole as friends of God, alive in him. In some Greek monasteries, saints' days are celebrated with boiled wheat decorated with an intricate icon of the saint picked out in coloured sugar. Serbian families prepare wheat and a special bread for their 'Slava', the feast of the family patron saint. The feast of St Basil, on New Year's Day, is marked in Greece by the cutting of the 'vasilopitta' ('Basil-cake'), traditionally containing a coin. Legend connects it with an occasion when St Basil, bishop of Caesarea in Asia Minor, collected valuables from his flock in order to placate a hostile emperor. The first slice of the vasilopitta is designated 'for Christ', and if the coin is found in that piece, it is given to the Church or to the poor. Family or personal saints' days are times of hospitality, and increasingly today an occasion to share the feast with friends and neighbours beyond the church community.

The importance of food in the Orthodox Church reminds us that nothing is too ordinary to be part of spiritual life. We bring our first apples or grapes to be blessed on the feast of Christ's transfiguration (6 August); we receive them back as a blessing from Christ who is the 'vine' (John 15:5). On the eve of a great feast we bless five loaves, recalling Christ's feeding of the five thousand (John 6:9), and are sustained with bread and wine. We ask Christ's blessing on every meal at home, because eating is never a merely physical event: it is an opportunity to 'taste and see that the Lord is good' (Psalm 34:8).

Further reading

- Kazich, Fr Thomas, ed. (2008) *Bread* [Little Falcons 15.4]; see www.littlefalcons.net
- Schmemmann, Fr Alexander (1973) *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press)
- Schmemmann, Fr Alexander (1974) *Great Lent* (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary Press).
- (Ware) Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia (1978) 'The Meaning of the Great Fast' in: Mother Mary and Kallistos Ware, trans., *The Lenten Triodion* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978).
- (Ware) Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia (1996) 'Lent and the Consumer Society', in: A. Walker and C. Carras (eds) *Living Orthodoxy in the Modern World* London: SPCK, pp64-84.