

THE TRADITION OF THE
VASILÓPITA

(pronounced “vǎ-sē-LŌ-pē-tǎ”)

“SAINT BASIL’S BREAD”

The tradition of baking and cutting a special “píta” (which can mean a loaf of bread, a cake, or even a pie!) each year on January 1st is observed in honor of our Holy Father Basil the Great, archbishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia – hence its name “Vasilópita” meaning “St Basil’s Bread.” This tradition is observed in both parish churches and in the homes of the faithful. What is the meaning of this tradition and how did it begin?

For centuries upon centuries parents, grandparents and Godparents have related the following to Orthodox children about St Basil and the “Vasilópita.” One year, during a time of terrible famine, the emperor levied a sinfully excessive tax upon the people of Caesarea. The tax was such a heavy burden upon the already impoverished people that to avoid debtors’ prison each family had to relinquish its few remaining coins and pieces of jewelry, including precious family heirlooms. Learning of this injustice against his flock, St Basil the Great, the archbishop of Caesarea, took up his bishop’s staff and the book of the holy Gospels and came to his people’s defense by fearlessly calling the emperor to repentance. By God’s grace, the emperor did repent! He cancelled the tax and instructed his tax collectors to turn over to St Basil all of the chests containing the coins and jewelry which had been paid as taxes by the people of Caesarea. But now St Basil was faced with the daunting and impossible task of returning these thousands of coins and pieces of jewelry to their rightful owners. After praying for a long time before the icons of our Master Christ and His All-holy Mother, St Basil had all the treasures baked into one huge “píta.” He then called all the townspeople to prayer at the cathedral and, after Divine Liturgy, he blessed and cut the “píta,” giving a piece to each person. Miraculously each owner received in his piece of “Vasilópita” his own valuables. They all joyfully returned home, giving thanks to God who had delivered them from abject poverty and to their good and holy bishop, St Basil the Great! In remembrance of that miracle wrought by God as a result of St Basil’s love and defense of his people, Orthodox Christians have observed the tradition of the “Vasilópita” each year on January 1st - the date on which St Basil reposed in the Lord in the year 379.

In some places the “Vasilópita” is prepared as a loaf of rich bread (like that used for Artoklasia), while in other places it takes the form of a spicy sheet cake (without frosting). But no matter what form a “Vasilópita” may take, they all have one thing in common – each contains a single coin.¹ After placing the bread dough or cake batter in the proper baking pan, the baker makes with the foil wrapped coin the sign of the Cross over it, closes his/her eyes, and then secretly places it into the unbaked “Vasilópita.”

¹ While any coin is appropriate, a gold electroplated “Vasilopita Coin” (with an image of St Basil on the obverse and the inscription “Blessing of the year from the Vasilopita” on the reverse) is available from Father George Papadeas at Patmos Press – 917 Valencia Road - Daytona Beach, FL 32119. Phone: 386-788-9386, Fax: 386-788-0325, Email: patmospress@cs.com

After the “Vasilópita” is baked and cooled, it is blessed and cut following Divine Liturgy for the feast of St Basil on January 1st. At churches it is blessed and cut in the parish fellowship hall by the bishop or priest, and in homes it is blessed and cut by the head of the household. The blessing of the “Vasilópita” usually begins with the Apolytikion of St Basil the Great (chanted in tone 1 or said):

“Thy sound hath gone forth into all the earth that received thy word.
Thereby thou hast divinely taught the Faith;
Thou hast made manifest the nature of things that be;
Thou hast adorned the ways of man.
O namesake of the royal priesthood,² our righteous Father Basil,
Intercede with Christ God that our souls be saved.”

The head of the household makes the sign of the Cross over the “Vasilópita” with a knife while saying, “In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” All respond “Amen.” Then pieces of the “Vasilópita” are cut in the following order:

A 1st small piece, cut from the very center of the “Vasilópita,” is for Christ.

The 2nd small piece is for the Theotokos.

The 3rd small piece is for St Basil.

The 4th larger piece is for the poor.

Then large pieces are given to all present, beginning with the eldest and ending with youngest. He or she who receives the “Vasilópita Coin” is traditionally considered to be especially blessed for the New Year.

² In Greek the name Basil means “royal” or “kingly.”

APOLYTIKION OF ST BASIL THE GREAT (January 1st) - Tone 1

Εἰς πάσαν τὴν γῆν

Thy sound hath gone forth

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