

Traditions give holy days international flavor

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — On Holy Saturday afternoon, regular churchgoers at St. Stanislaus Parish will be steadying themselves for a yearly shock.

What stuns the faithful attendants is the vast crowd of people — numbering in the hundreds — that comes out of the proverbial woodwork for a church service that takes place in the afternoon each year.

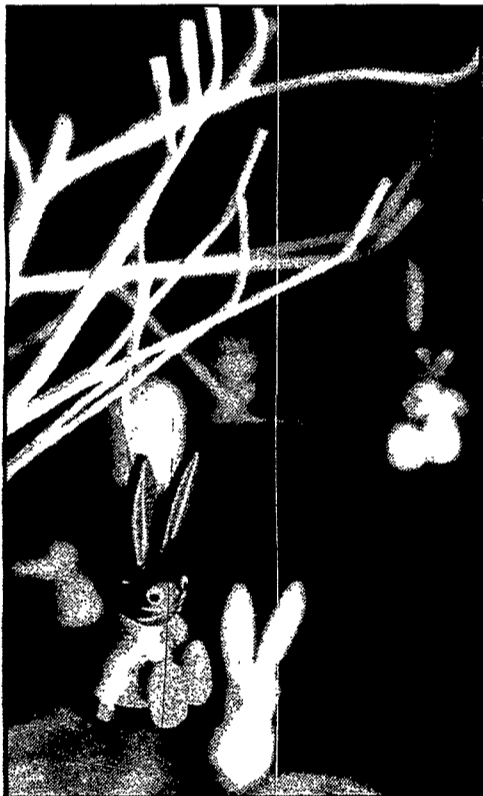
One parishioner explained the mystery, noting that the crowds of people carry baskets of food they want blessed by the priests who reside at the Hudson Avenue parish, noted for its large Polish-American population.

The basket-blessing service is not without a competitive edge, remarked Kathy Urbanic, a parishioner who wrote *Shoulder to Shoulder: Polish Americans in Rochester, N.Y., 1890-1990*, a history of Rochester's Polish community and its customs.

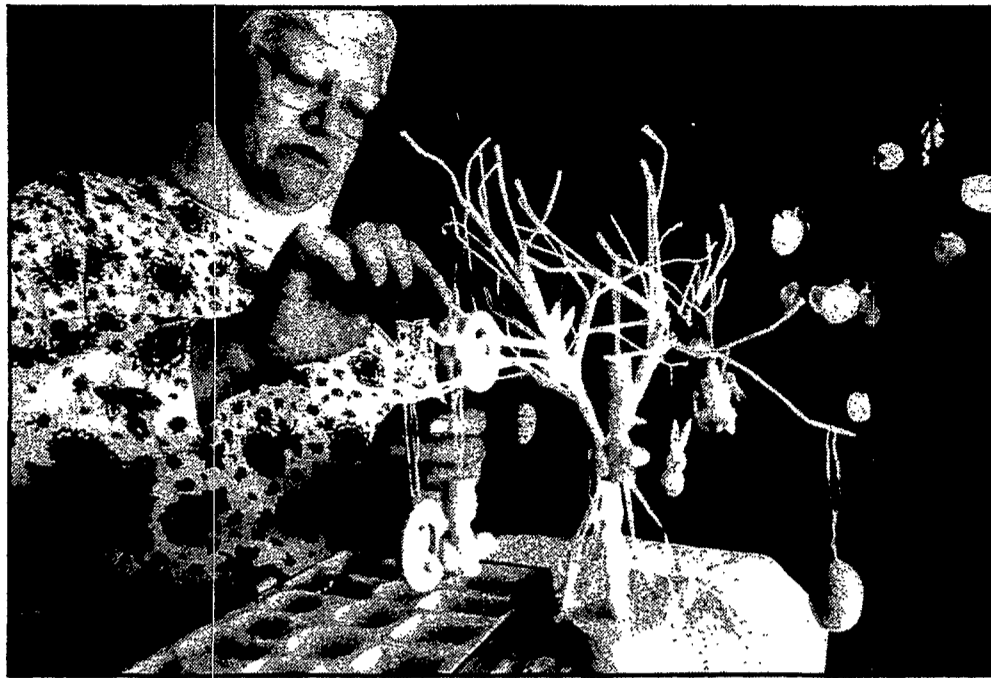
"The women vie for how fancy their baskets will be," Urbanic said with a laugh, adding, "The church smells wonderful from all this food."

St. Stanislaus' observance of an ethnic Holy Week tradition coincides with many such observances in the diocese, not to mention the whole Christian world.

Parishioners at the Ukrainian Catholic Church of the Epiphany, 202 Carter St., also present various foods for their priests to bless on Holy Saturday, said Helene Snihur, a parishioner. She noted, however,



These hand-carved Easter tree ornaments come from Germany.



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer
Maria Kellner Bors decorates a traditional German Easter tree, one of several she displays in her home during Holy Week.

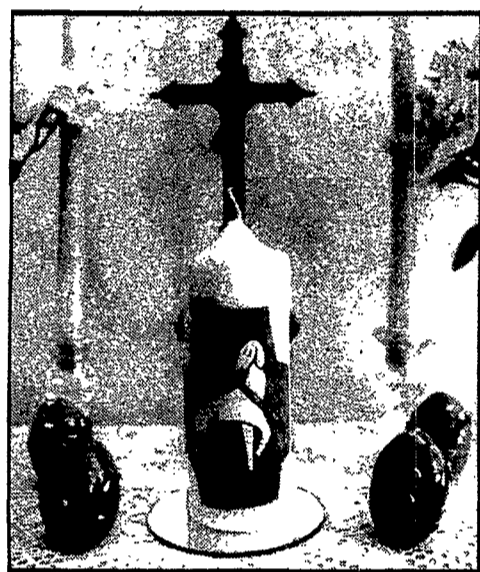
that the Eastern Rite parish follows a different calendar, thus celebrating Holy Saturday and Easter one week after the day on which churches of the Roman Rite mark Christ's Resurrection.

But like the Poles, the Ukrainians bring their food in baskets, selecting items for certain symbolic values. Horseradish root, for example, symbolizes the bitterness of Christ's passion, Snihur said.

That passion and death is memorialized during Good Friday services, when a clothed icon of Christ is placed in a "tomb" about five feet tall in front of the church's main altar, she said. Throughout the weekend, parishioners approach Christ's "grave" and place reverent kisses on it, awaiting the celebration of His Resurrection on Sunday, which is marked by the unclenching of the icon.

Hispanics share with the Ukrainian people a propensity to dramatize various moments in the crucifixion, death, and Resurrection of Jesus. At noontime on Good Friday, 32 parishioners at Mt. Carmel Church in Rochester were slated to take part in a dramatization of the Stations of the Cross, according to the parish's pastoral assistants, Sisters Mary Regis Straughn, RSM, and Obdulia Olivar, MgSp.Sto. The actors are followed by a procession of hundreds of people from the mostly Puerto Rican parish, they added.

The dramatization begins in the church with Pontius Pilate washing his hands. The participants then exit the church and make their way through the surrounding neighborhood, Sister Straughn said, adding that a driver following the procession narrates the re-enactment through a



German Easter egg candles, which are adorned with pussy willow patterns, surround the paschal candle.

loudspeaker on top of his car. "We have big posters depicting pen drawings of the stations," Sister Straughn said.

While such traditions are rooted directly in the Gospel, other Holy Week and Easter Sunday symbols and traditions originated in the spring festivals of pre-Christian times. Flowers, for example, are a universal symbol of rebirth used by non-Christian and Christian cultures alike in celebrations of the earth's reawakening from its death-like winter slumber.

Indeed, pre-Christian peoples employed some of the most cherished symbols of Easter long before they came to be associated with the Resurrection of Christ. The ancient Egyptians, Persians, Gauls, Romans and Greeks saw eggs as symbols of a hope for new life, a symbolism that the Christian church adopted as its own when it spread from one culture to another. Just as a young chick is entombed in the eggshell before it hatches into the world, Christ was buried in His tomb, apparently

lifeless, until He rose on Easter Sunday like a newborn bird.

The word Easter itself may have been derived from the German word "Ostern," meaning "dawn." Another popular explanation is that Easter comes from the name for the Anglo-Saxon spring goddess Eastre, whose festival nearly coincided with the early church's observance of Christ's Resurrection, itself generally falling somewhere after the Jewish Passover.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem for the last Passover before his death, Scripture tells us he was greeted by crowds of people waving palm branches, in an apparent show of homage to a king. Had the Lord entered Frejdberg, Germany, however, he might have been greeted with a show of waving pussy willows, according to Maria Bors, who was born there and who emigrated to the United States in 1949.

"On Palm Sunday, everybody brought their own pussy willows, everybody wears them," remarked Bors, a parishioner at St. Pius the Tenth in Chili. "That's the first thing that actually opens up — it's the first sign of spring," she said.

Bors noted that Germans paint designs of pussy willows on Easter eggs, which themselves are often arrayed on "trees" — layers of circular shelves hung on poles and dotted by rows of holes holding the eggs. The diameters of the shelves decrease from the bottom of the pole to the top.

Bors related memories of Holy Week and Easter in her homeland along with her husband, Josef, who fled his native Hungary after participating in the 1956 uprising against Soviet troops.

Josef noted that before the communist takeover of Hungary, Catholics celebrated many Easter traditions that resembled those of other nations. In both Germany and Hungary, the people dressed up in their best clothes to attend Easter Sunday Mass, the Bors observed, a custom which 19th-century English scholar John Brand attributed to a belief that a year of bad fortune would follow anyone who did not wear at least one new article of clothing on that day.

Josef recalled another tradition — a dinner of ham and eggs on Easter Sunday — that seems to be universally popular among the various Christian cultures. Interestingly, Brand asserted that the consumption of ham on Easter originated in the European Christians' desire to separate themselves from Judaism, in which eating pork is forbidden.

Dancing during Lent is supposedly forbidden for Hispanics, according to Father Laurence Tracy, pastoral assistant to the diocesan Office of the Spanish Apostolate. He noted that Puerto Ricans have a saying that goes: "If you dance during Lent, your feet will fall off." Hence, he pointed out that the Hispanic community often holds dances on Holy Saturday night, the traditional end of Lent.

"People do dance during Lent, but the fact is, they feel more comfortable doing it on Holy Saturday," he said.

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