

# Eastern Orthodox Pascha begins

By Kathleen A. Shaw TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF  
[kshaw@telegram.com](mailto:kshaw@telegram.com)

Late tonight many Eastern Orthodox Christians will begin gathering in the area's 12 Orthodox churches to begin the joyous celebration of Pascha, or Easter.

The churches will be darkened and then one candle — the Paschal candle — will be lighted. From its flame, those attending the liturgy will light their own candles and before long the churches will be bathed in soft candlelight as people exclaim, "Christ is risen!"

Eastern Christians are celebrating Pascha later this year than the Western Christians because they use a different formula for determining the Easter season. The Rev. Michael Abdelahad, archpriest at St. George Orthodox Cathedral in Worcester, said Orthodox Christians prefer to use the term Pascha, the Aramaic word for Passover.

Bishop Methodios of Boston will be principal celebrant at the 11 a.m. Agape service tomorrow in St. Spyridon Cathedral, Worcester. It has become an Easter tradition.

Edward Habib, a member of St. George, said Easter in Orthodox tradition "is indeed a very wonderful celebration." A lifelong Eastern Christian, Mr. Habib said he and his wife, a former Roman Catholic who converted several years ago, have been in church every night during the past week, which is Holy Week in the Orthodox calendar.

Observing Holy Week is a family event. His children and other teenagers and other church members planned to spend last night at the church keeping vigil and reading from Scriptures.

"This is very noteworthy, as kids do not get a lot of good press, but to go into the church on Saturday morning and see them sleeping in the church is wonderful," he said. He and his wife will stand watch from 7 to 8 a.m. today.

Mr. Habib said the holiday "is always a time of memories." He recalled that when he was younger and his grandparents were still alive, the day was filled with visits to the homes of family and friends. Then it was "home for the main meal," he said. "And the meals were pretty impressive. I still try to keep up with the old traditions with lamb, grape leaves, stuffed eggplant, cooked and raw kibbee and meat pies."

If food is one of the stars of the holiday, it is because many Orthodox faithful observe a strict fast during Great Lent. Mr. Habib admitted he is not that strict, but does give up all meat during the penitential season.

William Kiritsy, a member of St. Spyridon and president of the parish council, said he has found this year to be special because a new energy has moved through in his faith community.

"I have had the great privilege to witness a rebirth, a renewed spirit within our community," he said. "Each day we gather and discuss new programs and new ideas spun from a golden thread of a collective goal, to battle complacency and weave a cloak that will embrace us all."

The rebirth and energy has special meaning for Mr. Kiritsy. A lifelong member of the Orthodox community, he said he likes to call himself "an Orthodox Christian in progress."

"At one time, like some, I felt that simply showing up for the Sunday service or attending occasional functions was good enough. In that sense, it would grant me the appearance of a good and faithful Christian. I have since realized that, like anything, in order to understand the importance of the ultimate sacrifice, one must be a participant in the Orthodox faith and in the community and in life," he said.

Orthodox Christians play an Easter game with boiled dyed red eggs. "One person will say, 'Christ has risen,' and the other will return with, 'Truly he has risen.' They will rap the eggs together to see which egg will prevail," he said. The eggs are dyed red, usually on Holy Thursday, to symbolize the blood of Christ. The Sunday Agape service at St. George will be followed by the annual Easter egg hunt.

Rev. Abdelahad recalled a memory from his years in seminary that "truly crystallizes the meaning of Pascha for me. It was my first year as a student at St. Vladimir's Seminary in New York and we were in the midst of the services of Pascha. We had completed the procession, proclaimed the risen Christ and the choir was singing the verses of the Paschal Canon. During the singing, the bells were ringing and the celebrating clergy were censuring the interior of the chapel.

"As they were censuring, they proclaiming 'Christ is risen!' and the worshipping community responded, 'Indeed He is risen!' It was a complete assault on all of the senses — bells ringing, the sweet smell of incense, the choir singing and the clergy making their Paschal proclamation. In the midst of all this, a student asked the wife of our dean how she could pray in all of this. Her response was one that I will always remember. Without a moment's hesitation, she responded, 'My dear, it's Pascha!' This is the time when you don't have to worry about praying. It's a celebration," Rev. Abdelahad said.

The notion of celebration has affected his outlook on the holiday ever since. "As a pastor, I have attempted to bring that incredible celebration that was Pascha at St. Vladimir's to my own community here in Worcester. It is especially gratifying to watch a parishioner who is immersing themselves fully in the celebration for the first time," he said.

"In the Orthodox Church, the time leading up to Pascha is a time of work," he said. He mentioned hours of worship, the daily challenge to fast and prayer, reading scripture and performing charitable works. At Pascha, one can see the rewards for the Lenten work in the faces of the people, he said.

Rev. Abdelahad noted that Orthodox Christians are also mindful this Easter season about the recent death of Archbishop Iakovos, who headed the Greek Orthodox archdiocese.

"His death reminds us that the goal of every Christian is their own resurrection — to be welcomed into the eternal kingdom of our Father in heaven," he said.

## An Eastern Orthodox Easter



**WORCESTER**— Fotini Karamanakis, 5, of Dudley, attends the Lamentations of Christ service yesterday at St. Spyridon Cathedral. The service was part of the Eastern Orthodox Christian Holy Week, leading up to the celebration of Easter tomorrow.