



St. Stephen Protomartyr Ukrainian Catholic Church

views from the pews

How it all began

March 25, 2018

PUSSY WILLOWS ON PALM SUNDAY – submitted by Ed and Josie Demchuk

Pussy willows appear in great abundance on Palm Sunday for us at St. Stephen's, but where do they come from and who gets them for us? Fortunately St. Stephen's has had a resolute group of volunteers, who over the last 50 years have made this happen. These aren't just the wild variety but a hybrid species that have large weeping catkins. They are usually found in parks or private yards, thus obtaining these is often difficult! Over the years volunteers have scoured city parks, school yards and private yards, sometimes with permission and sometimes not. Ed Demchuk recalls how he and Larry Sachkiw would venture out after work and on evenings to the identified spots and cut away, hoping no one would object.



In one instance, while in a southwest city park, an elderly lady ran across the street and took pictures of Ed and Chris Maken cutting branches and yelled "This is illegal, I'm reporting you to City Parks". The following year Ed returned, paying no heed to the warning, and was confronted by City Parks who told him this was the last time for cutting. As a result they relocated to Heritage Park, with permission, until those trees were cut down.

In the last 10 years or so most willows have come from private yards including Harry Kozicki's productive tree. Many thanks to the current volunteers, Don Zarski, Nestor Shular, John Kowal, Harry Kozicki and Ed Demchuk who often have to climb shaky ladders to get the good branches! At least 3 attempts have been made to plant trees at St Stephen's, with little success, but one tree survives in the corner of the lower parking lot. Four others are flourishing at a private acreage. Ed has also obtained permission from City Parks and planted 6 more trees on the city escarpment behind his property. *Hopefully we will have our own supply of pussy willows for years to come!*

Why Pussy Willows on Palm Sunday?

Palm Sunday, which is called Flowery Sunday or Willow Sunday in the Eastern Churches of Byzantine/Slavic liturgical tradition, is observed by many customs unique to the Slavs. The most important of these is the ritual use of flowering willow branches (pussy willows) in the processions of that day. Conventional wisdom has it that the Eastern Slavs used pussy willows because palm trees do not grow in northern Europe.

- ❖ **Save the dates:** June 1 – June 3, 2018 for the 50th Anniversary **Commemorative Events** – details coming soon!
- ❖ **Recipe Collections** for the 50th Anniversary Cookbook - please send as many as you wish. **Deadline April 1st.** For more information contact Trish Popel at 50anivcookbook@gmail.com or 403-835-3077.
- ❖ The 3rd session in our speaker series, **Beginning the Grief Journey** is on Friday May 11th from 6:30 – 9:30. Cost is FREE and refreshments will be served. Register with Jean Pashulka: 403-271-6092 or email mykitchen@shaw.ca.

While it is true that palm trees do not grow in northern Europe, that fact has no bearing on the Slavic customs associated with Flowery Sunday. The pre-Christian Slavs endowed the pussy willow with energizing properties. The willow heralded the end of harsh winter and the renewal of spring, while protecting people and livestock from diseases, the homes from lightening and misfortune and by fostering the fertility of man and beast.

With the conversion of the Slavs to Christianity, their willow customs were often adapted to the requirements of the new faith, finding application in the processions of Flowery Sunday to recall Our Lord's triumphant entry into Jerusalem, but more properly going beyond Great and Holy Week as a unitive symbol of the renewal of life fully revealed in the Glorious Resurrection. Thus we see in the folk art and customs associated with the Resurrection the use of flowering willows as a decorative item on pisanki cloths and on the Easter baskets and table, and for the remainder of the year they were placed behind the icons and crucifixes. Crosses made of blessed willow branches were buried in the ground to protect the crops for hail. Children swallowed the catkins as remedy for colds and the branches, which contain acetylsalicylic acid (aspirin) were boiled and the infusion drunk to treat pains and fever. The faithful were encouraged to plant the willow branches used in the processions of Flowery Sunday around their homes and outbuildings to protect man and beast from harm. Many of these quasi-sacramental uses of the willow persist to this day.

More important to Eastern Christians of Byzantine/Slavic liturgical tradition are the quasi-liturgical customs, many of which found their way to America with the migration of Slavs from Europe. Those customs like many other religious traditions derive from and support important doctrines of the faith and, interestingly, are found among most Slavs whether Orthodox, Greek Catholic or Roman Catholic. When one sees Ruthenians, Russians or Ukrainians striking one another on the shoulder on Flowery Sunday with the willow branch and reciting the verse: "It is not I but the willow branch which strikes you to remind you that in seven days is the Great Day", we are all reminded by the willow branch as symbol of life that Christ is risen from the dead, that by His death He trampled death and to those in the graves He granted life.

THE RESURRECTION AND THE WILLOW

In Slavic lands the willows grow, by streams and bogs and waters low.
The ancient Slavic peoples saw that willows bloom before the thaw,
When warm winds end the frigid cold, and break, at last, the winter's hold,
To greet the spring and celebrate, the vernal advent's advocate,
Of growth, renewal, life and light, and set the cosmic order right.
The Slavic peoples gathered in, the flow'ry willow branches in,
Their homes to decorate anew, to cure their ills, their lives renew.
Then one day there came from far, new religion which would bar,
The grasp of ancient evils' hold upon the Slavic souls as told,
By True Glory's saving creeds, to grant men life and serve their needs.
The Word Made Flesh who lived and died, and rose again as verified,
By Holy Writ and voices old, Who testified as was foretold.
Christ is risen from the dead and by His death as truly said,
He trampled death and life He gave to those who lie within the grave.
And thus the lowly willow came, The Resurrection to proclaim,
Bear witness to the Great Event for which the Holy One was sent. So when the cold of winter ends, the message that the willow sends, and flow'ry branches say: Next week is Resurrection Day!

