

# Religion and Traditions - 1

The majority of Poles in Victoria are of Roman Catholic faith (around 68%), followed by Judaism (around 15%). There are also Polish religious minorities such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-Day Adventists and Orthodox.

**The Polish Catholic faith** is strongly maintained in Australia. There are eleven Polish priests closely involved in the Polish community in Victoria. Sunday mass is, for many Polish elderly, a strict ritual. Priests and nuns maintain close links with the Polish community. The Catholic Church calendar is marked by two major cycles, these being Christmas and Easter.

For Catholic Poles, the most important traditional festival of the year is **Christmas (Boże Narodzenie)**. The festivities begin on Christmas Eve, which is a time of family gathering and reconciliation. It is customary to share a church-blessed wafer – *opłatek*, and wishes of happiness and prosperity before the evening meal.

The traditional Christmas Eve supper consists of non-meat and fish dishes, usually herring and carp. For Christmas Eve supper *pierogi* (dumplings with a wide variety of fillings) are made. Traditional cakes, such as *pierniki* (gingerbread) and *makowiec* (poppy seed cake), are also served. Other traditional dishes appearing on the table during the Christmas period include *barszcz* (beetroot soup), mushroom or fish soup, *bigos* (sauerkraut with field mushrooms), and dried fruit compote. Polish Christmas carols, with a specific national character, almost all have anonymous composers, and many originated from traditional folk carols. A Polish version of "Silent Night" ("Cicha noc") is also popular.

## Quickly On To Bethlehem (Przybieżeli do Betlejem)

Giving their respects in all humility,  
To the Infant Jesus from hearts lovingly,  
Glory to God on Highest  
Glory to God on Highest  
And on earth, peace to men.

Oddawali swe ukłony w pokorze,  
Tobie z serca ochotnego, o Boże!  
Chwała na wysokościach,  
Chwała na wysokościach,  
A pokój na ziemi.

**The Easter (Wielkanoc) tradition** of colouring eggs is still alive in Polish homes. But these days, eggs are rarely decorated in the exquisite patterns that were used in the past. They are usually dyed while being cooked in water with commercial dyes or onion peels.

Good Friday (*Wielki Piątek*) is observed by many Polish people as a day of fasting. For observant Polish Catholics, confession and communion are extremely important on Good Friday.

On Easter Saturday, the traditional *święconka* (sh-vee-en-tson-kah), a little basket of food, is taken to church to be blessed. Easter Sunday is celebrated by attending mass and then by a large feast at home with family; before the meal begins, each person is given a piece of the blessed food.

The traditional Easter symbols include a small lamb made of sugar, butter, pastry or chocolate, a chocolate easter bunny, coloured hard-boiled eggs, and small pieces of the green box plant.

These traditions are observed by most Polish people, even those who would not consider themselves religious.

