

## **Greek Orthodox New Year's Tradition – Irene Fiorentinos**

The Greek Orthodox celebrate the Feast of Saint Basil the Great on New Year's Day. Saint Basil is one of the Greek Orthodox Church's Three Great Hierarchs and his eloquent theological writings are incorporated into a special liturgy celebrated only on January 1st. He was born in 329, in Caesarea of Cappadocia (now part of Turkey) into a very educated and holy family. Prior to his death on January 1, 379, he had been the Bishop of Caesarea, and had been responsible for establishing institutions to protect the underprivileged and orphaned. Another way we commemorate Saint Basil (Agios Vasilis) is with the Vasilopita. This is a cake that we cut at midnight on January 1 (and at community gatherings throughout January) that has been baked with a gold coin in it. Whoever receives the coin will have good luck throughout the year. When Saint Basil was the Bishop of Caesarea, he was responsible for returning to the people valuables that had been taken from them as a tax that was then cancelled. The people could not agree on the rightful owners, and Saint Basil suggested that they bake the valuables inside a big cake (pita) and when the cake was cut each owner miraculously received the right valuable. When cutting our Vasilopita, we always cut the first piece for Christ, the second for Saint Basil, the third for the poor because we need to remember to take care of those less fortunate than us, and then we start with our house and on down the line of the family and friends. In Greece, Christmas gifts are actually exchanged on January 1 not December 25 because it is Saint Basil who brings them.