

The Fast of the Holy Apostles



*"Who ever prays and fasts has two wings lighter than the wind itself."
(St. John Chrysostom)*

The holy Apostles prepared themselves for the coming of the Holy Spirit with prayer and fasting. They prayed and fasted much before they went out to preach the Gospel. After prayer and fasting they ordained new presbyters for apostolic work, as we read in the Acts of the Apostles: "And when they had ordained to them priests in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, in whom they believed." (Acts, 14, 22) St. John Chrysostom said that "the Apostles almost always fasted." (Sermon 57 on St. Matthew)

The Holy Church from earliest times has prepared her faithful with

prayer and fasting for the great feast of the Major Apostles, SS. Peter and Paul whose memory we celebrate on June 29, along with the Synaxis of the Twelve Apostles the following day. Because this fast occurs after the holy season of Pentecost, in ancient times it was sometimes called the fast of the Pentecost. Other titles are also given to this fast; it is known as the fast of the holy Apostles, the Apostolic Fast, the Fast of Peter (Peter's Fast) and the Summer Fast. Our people call it Petriwka (i.e., the Fast of Peter or Peter's Fast). When was the Fast of Peter instituted? How long did it last? What are its prescriptions?

The Institution of the Fast of Peter

The fast of the holy Apostles is very ancient, dating back to the first centuries of Christianity. We have the testimony of St. Athanasius the Great, St. Ambrose of Milan, St. Leo the Great and Theodoret of Cyrus regarding it. The oldest testimony regarding the Petriwka fast is given to us by St. Athanasius the Great (f373). In his letter to Emperor Constance, in speaking of the persecution by the Arians, he writes: "During the week following holy Pentecost, the people who observed the fast went out to the cemetery to pray." "The Lord so ordained it," says St. Ambrose (f397), "that as we have participated in his sufferings during the Forty Days, so we should also rejoice in his Resurrection during the season of Pentecost. We do not fast during the season of Pentecost, since our Lord Himself was present amongst us during those days... Christ's presence was like nourishing food for the Christians. So too, during Pentecost, we feed on the Lord who is present among us. On the days following his ascension into heaven, however, we again fast." (Sermon 61)

St. Leo the Great (f461) says: "After the long feast of Pentecost, fasting is especially necessary to purify our thoughts and render us worthy to receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit... Therefore, the salutary custom was established of fasting after the joyful days during which we celebrated the resurrection and ascension of our Lord, and the coming of the Holy Spirit."

The pilgrim Silvia Egeria in her Diary (fourth century) records that on the day following the feast of Pentecost, a period of fasting began. The Apostolic Constitutions, a work of the fourth century, prescribes: "After the feast of Pentecost, celebrate one week, then observe a fast, for justice demands rejoicing after the reception of the gifts of God and fasting after the body has been refreshed."

From the testimonies of the fourth century we ascertain that in Alexandria, Jerusalem and Antioch the Fast of the holy Apostles was connected with Pentecost and not with the feast of the Apostles SS. Peter and Paul. In the first centuries, after Pentecost there was one week of rejoicing, that is Privileged Days, followed by one week of fasting.

The canons of Nicephor, Patriarch of Constantinople (806-815), mention Peter's Fast. The Typicon of St. Theodore the Studite speaks of the Forty Days Fast of the holy Apostles. Simeon of Thessalonica (fl429) explains the purpose of this fast in this manner: "The Fast of the Apostles is justly established in their honor, for through them we have received numerous benefits and for us they are exemplars and teachers of the fast... For one week after the descent of the Holy Spirit, in accordance with the Apostolic Constitution composed by Clement, we celebrate, and then during the following week, we fast in honor of the Apostles."

The Duration of the Fast of Peter

The Fast of Peter came into practice in the Church through custom rather than law. For this reason there was no uniformity for a long time, either in its observance or its duration. Some fasted twelve days, others six, still others four and others only one day. Theodore Balsamon, Patriarch of Antioch (fl204), regarding the Fast of Peter, said: "All the faithful, that is the laity and the monks, are obliged to fast seven days and more, and whoever refuses to do so, let him be excommunicated from the Christian community."

From the work "On Three Forty Days Fasts", which is credited to a monk of the monastic community of Anastasius Sinaite (sixth-seventh centuries), we learn that the Fast of the holy Apostles lasted from the first Sunday after Pentecost to the feast of the Dormition of the Most Holy Mother of God. Later, however, the Fast of the Dormition was separated from it and the month of July was excluded from the Fast of Peter. Simeon of Thessalonica speaks of Peter's Fast as of one week's duration. The Syrian Unites reduced this fast to four days; the Syrian Jacobites kept this fast along with the Greeks.

In our Church the Fast of the holy Apostles lasts from the Sunday of All Saints to the 29th of June, the feast of the Apostles SS. Peter and Paul. This fast may be of longer or shorter duration depending upon which day the Pasch (Easter) is celebrated. If the feast of Easter occurs sooner, then the Petriwka is longer; if Easter comes later, then the Petriwka is shorter. At its longest it could last six weeks, at its shortest, one week and one day. The duration of the Fast of Peter has remained the same as today since the beginning of Christianity in Ukraine.

Prescriptions of the Fast of Peter

The Fast of Peter is somewhat more mitigated than the Great Fast before Easter. The Kievan Metropolitan George (1069-1072) in his "Rules" does not allow meat or dairy products to be eaten during the Petriwka. On Wednesday and Friday, he prescribes dry food, that is, bread and water or dry fruits. On Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday he permits fish twice a day and wine. In addition to this, he directs that one hundred prostrations (profound bows to the ground) be made daily, excepting Saturdays, Sundays and holy days. Since Metropolitan George was a Greek, we may assume that he prescribed for our Church the same practice on the Fast of Peter as prevailed in the Greek Church at that time.

The Synod of Zamost (1720) mentions that in our Church the Petriwka (Peter's Fast) lasted from the first Sunday after Pentecost, that is, from the Sunday of All Saints to the feast of the Apostles SS. Peter and Paul. The Synod notes that laborers and villagers may be dispensed

from the fast either partly or completely, since the fast occurs during the harvest season. During the Petriwka, the Synod of Lviv (1891) allows dairy products on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, and meat on the other four days of the week; however, it imposes upon the laity the obligation of praying five "Our Father's" and five "Hail Mary's" before and after the noon day meal and supper; religious must recite Psalm 50.

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