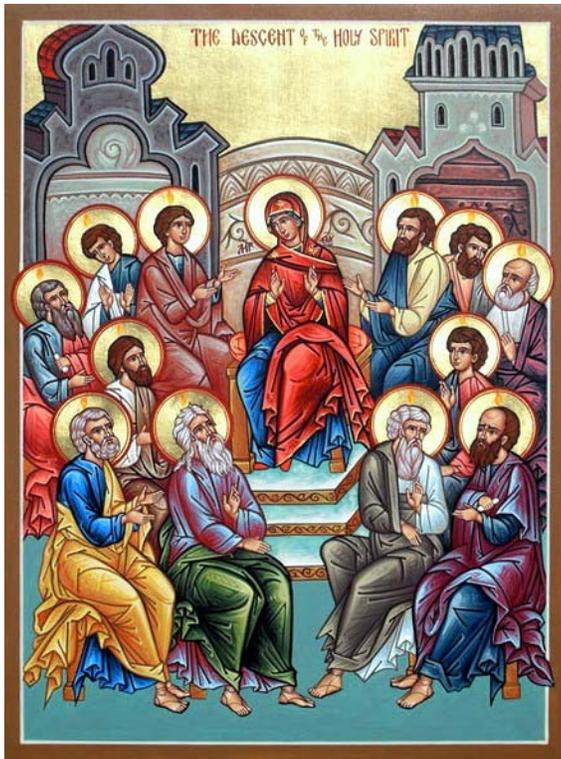


The Feast of the Pentecost



"We have seen the true light, we have received the Heavenly Spirit, we have found the trite faith, we worship the undivided Trinity, for It has saved us." (Stichera of Vespers of the Feast of the Pentecost)

The glorious feast of the Resurrection concludes with a feast also most glorious and great — and that is, the feast of the Pentecost. After the Nativity and Resurrection of our Lord this feast belongs to the greatest feasts in the Ecclesiastical Year. The Descent of the Holy Spirit is, as it were, the seal on the work of the salvation of the human race accomplished by the Son of God. On the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit himself anoints the Apostles as preachers of the Good News of Christ. On this day the Church was born and began to function. The Holy Spirit ever guides, enlightens, sanctifies and preserves her on the path of truth.

"When the work the Father gave to the Son to do on earth was accomplished," says The Vatican Council, "the Holy Spirit was sent on the day of the Pentecost in order that He might continually sanctify the Church, and thus all those who believe would have access through Christ in one Spirit

to the Father... The Spirit dwells in the Church and in the hearts of the faithful, as in a temple. In them, He prays on their behalf and bears witness to the fact that they are adopted sons... By the power of the Gospel He makes the Church keep the freshness of youth. Uninterruptedly, He renews it and leads it to perfect union with its Spouse." (Constitution on the Church, §4)

The holy feast of Pentecost deserves our special attention because of its history, liturgy, and significance.

The Old Testament Pentecost

The Jewish people in ancient times celebrated three great feasts annually: the feast of the Passover, the feast of the Pentecost and the feast of Tabernacles. In the Book of Exodus we read: "Three times every year you shall celebrate feasts to me. You shall keep the feast of the unleavened bread. You shall keep the feast of the harvest of the first-fruits of your work, whatsoever you have sown in the field, and the feast also in the end of the year, when you have gathered in all your crops out of the field." (Exodus 23,14-16)

The feast takes its name from the fiftieth day after the feast of the Passover, and also from the fiftieth day from the beginning of the harvest. Pentecost is a Greek word which means "the fiftieth day". Originally, Pentecost was a feast of harvest and thanksgiving. On that day, according to the prescription of the law, great crowds of Jews would flock to Jerusalem even from distant lands, to render thanks to the Lord for the fruits of the earth and to make an offering of these fruits in the temple. Later, the Jews connected the feast of Pentecost as a feast of the harvest with an event in the history of Israel, in this case, with the anniversary of the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai on the fiftieth day after their departure from Egypt.

The Christian Pentecost

The Apostles and first Christians retained from the Old Testament the feast of the Passover as well as the feast of the Pentecost. They also preserved the name, Pentecost, because, for them, it was also the fiftieth day after the Pasch (Resurrection); however, they attached to it an altogether different significance.

The principal motive for celebrating Pentecost in the Church of the New Testament was the event of the Descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles. Thus, this feast is also called the day of the Descent of the Holy Spirit or the day of the Holy Trinity.

The Descent of the Holy Spirit was, for the primitive Christian Church, such a joyous, solemn and significant occasion, that they placed this feast on the same level with the feasts of the Resurrection and the Nativity of Christ. The celebration of this feast, like the feast of the Resurrection, in time, was extended to an entire week, during which the faithful also enjoyed the privilege of Free Days. In the third century, this feast became universally known. The service, honoring this feast, was composed in the eighth century by St. John Damascene and St. Cosmas of Maiuma.

The liturgy of this day is full of joy and praise of the Holy Spirit and the Holy Trinity.' 'Come all you nations," we sing in the stichera from the Vespers service of this feast, "let us worship the Divinity in Three Persons, the Son in the Father with the Holy Spirit. The Father from eternity had begotten the Son, co-eternal and co-reigning with him; and the Holy spirit was in the Father, glorified with the Son — one Power, one Being, one Substance, one Godhead, which we all worship, saying: 'Holy God — who created everything through the Son with help of the Holy Spirit; Holy Mighty One — through whom we knew the Father, and through whom the Holy Spirit came to the world; Holy Immortal One — Spirit, Comforter, who proceeds from the Father and rests in the Son, O Holy Trinity, glory be to you'". In the Matins service, at the Sticheras of Praises, we praise the Holy Spirit: "The Holy Spirit was, is and always will be. He is without beginning and without end, equal in essence with the Father and with the Son. He is life and the giver of life; he is light and the giver of light, he is all good and the fountain of all goodness..."

The following well-known prayer to the Holy Spirit from the service of the Pentecost found its way into our daily prayers: "Heavenly King, Comforter, Spirit of truth, everywhere present and filling all things, Treasury of good things and Giver of life, come and dwell in us and cleanse us of all stain and save our souls, O Good One." All our church services begin with this prayer.

The Church of the Old Testament had a custom on the feast of Pentecost of covering the floor of their homes and synagogues with fresh grass and adorning their homes and synagogues with the branches of trees and with flowers as a sign that, when the Law of God was given at Mount Sinai, all nature was in bloom. Presumably, the Apostles also observed this custom and decorated the upper room with greenery and flowers. This custom was also taken over by the Church of the New Testament. From this custom, Pentecost received another name namely, "Green Sunday". Flowers and greens are a sign of life and therefore became a symbol of the life-giving Spirit. Just as nature in springtime is renewed with greens and flowers, so too, holy Church and her faithful are renewed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

On the Monday following the feast of the Pentecost, our Church celebrates the feast of the Holy Spirit. The feast of Pentecost commemorates the event itself of the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles, while Monday is dedicated to paying special worship to the Holy Spirit as the Third Person of the Trinity. In regard to this special worship, the Monday Synaxary says: "On this day, i.e., the Monday of Pentecost, we honor that all-holy and life-giving and all-powerful Spirit, one God in the Holy Trinity, one in dignity, one in nature, and one in glory with the Father and with the Son... Out of deep reverence for the all-holy Spirit the Holy Fathers decreed that a separate feast be celebrated also during the Pentecost, in honor of Him who is the author of all that is good."

The Synods of Zamost and Lviv, when listing all the feasts, call this day the feast of the Holy Trinity. The Typicon of Father I. Dolnytsky calls this day simply the Monday of the Pentecost, and says that, on this day, the entire service of the feast of the Descent of the Holy Spirit is used and "in the Divine Liturgy the service of the feast of the Holy Trinity may also be used, if one desires." He noted that neither the Greek nor the Slavonic typicons, except for our Sluzhebnyks (Uturgikons = Missals), have this service, which must be celebrated only in churches dedicated to the Holy Trinity. Since the Middle Ages the Latin

Church keeps the feast of the Holy Trinity on the eighth day after the Pentecost, that is, on our Sunday of All Saints. Prince Maximilian, a Roman Catholic priest, in his "Lectures on the Eastern Liturgies", says that "Ukrainian Catholics, imitating the Latin Church, celebrate the feast of the Holy Trinity on the Monday after the Pentecost (p. 99). Actually, the feast of the Pentecost, properly speaking, is the feast of the Holy Trinity, as is evident from the name and the content of the service of that day.

The Vespers service of Monday merits special attention. Ordinarily it is not performed on Sunday evening, but immediately after the Divine Liturgy around noontime on the very day of the Pentecost. The linking of the Vespers service with the Divine Liturgy is explained by Father I. Dolnytsky as an opportunity for the faithful who are present at the Divine Liturgy to take part in the prayers which are read while kneeling. This Vespers service, characterized by three special prayers of a penitential nature were allegedly composed by St. Basil the Great (†379). The Byzantine Canonist Matthew Blastares (14th c.) testifies in his Nomocanon that St. Basil the Great also directed that these prayers be said while kneeling, as a sign of great respect for the Holy Spirit,

The Significance of the Feast of the Descent of the Holy Spirit

The event of the descent of the Holy Spirit was most fruitful in its effects and had great significance for the Apostles and the first Christians; it has this same significance for the whole Church everywhere and always. St. John Chrysostom in his homily on the feast of the Pentecost says: "The all gracious God today bestowed upon us gifts, too great to be adequately expressed in words. Therefore, let us all rejoice together, and while rejoicing, let us praise our God... For I ask, what was given to us for our salvation that was not given to us by the Holy Spirit? He freed us from slavery, adopted and called us to the freedom of the children of God. From this fountain (i.e. the Holy Spirit) flow prophecies, the grace of healing, and all the other gifts and fruits with which the Church is wont to adorn herself." In the sticheras of the Great Vespers service of Pentecost we read: "The Holy Spirit is the giver of all gifts. He pours forth prophecies, perfects the priesthood, teaches wisdom to the illiterate, and transforms fishermen into theologians; he brings together into one community the entire Church of God. O Comforter, one with the Father in nature and coreigning with Him, glory to you."

"Through the Holy Spirit," says St. Basil the Great, "our return to paradise is achieved, we are elevated to the heavenly kingdom, and become once more the children of God. Through Him we are able to call God, Father; we are able to become partakers of the grace of Jesus Christ, to be called children of light, and to share in everlasting glory..." (On the Holy Spirit, ch. 15)

The Holy Spirit bestowed upon the Apostles the gift of tongues, the gift of understanding the Scriptures, and the gift of fortitude in preaching and professing the holy faith. "On the day of Pentecost," says the Second Vatican Council, "the Holy Spirit came down upon the disciples to remain with them forever. The Church was publicly displayed to the multitude, the Gospel began to spread among the nations by means of preaching, and there was presaged that union of all peoples in the catholicity of the faith by means of the Church of the New Covenant, a Church which speaks all tongues, understands and accepts all tongues in her love..." (On Mission Activity of the Church, p. 4)

The gifts of the Holy Spirit are truly numerous and great. St. Paul speaks of them in his letter to the Galatians: "But the fruit of the Spirit is: charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness and goodness, faith, modesty, continency." (Gal. 5,22-23) The Holy Spirit has also descended upon us with his gifts in the Sacrament of Confirmation and he has anointed us as soldiers of Christ and made our bodies His temples. St. Paul reminds us of this great truth, admonishes and exhorts us to live accordingly: "Do you not know that your members are the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought at a great price. Glorify God and bear Him in your body." (I Cor. 6,19-20)

A Byzantine Rite Liturgical Year 1992, Toronto, Julian J. Katrij, OSBM,
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