

From Pascha To Pentecost By Protopresbyter Dr. George D. Dragas

The word, Pentecost, means “the fiftieth” and is used to designate the great event of the Outpouring of the Holy Spirit (*Epiphotesis*) upon the Apostles and the Church on the 50th day after the Resurrection of Christ, just ten days after His Ascension into Heaven.

Before His Passion, the Lord spoke to his Disciples about the gift of the Holy Spirit, which they were to receive after the Ascension. The details are preserved in the Gospel of Saint John:

“I will ask the Father to send you the Holy Spirit who will defend you and always be with you” (14:16). He also said, “The Holy Spirit cannot come to defend you until I leave. But after I am gone, I will send the Spirit to you” (16:7).

After His Resurrection, the Lord appeared to the Disciples, and He said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (20:22). This was a foretaste of the Outpouring (*Epiphotesis*) on Pentecost Sunday.

Near the end of Saint Luke’s Gospel, Christ tells His Disciples,

“I will send you the One My Father has promised, but you must stay in the city until you are given power from above” (24:49).

It is in the Acts of the Apostles, however, that Saint Luke speaks of the fulfillment of this promise:

“On the day of Pentecost, all the Lord’s followers were together in one place. Suddenly, there was a noise from heaven like the sound of a mighty wind. It filled the house where they were meeting. Then they saw what looked like fiery tongues moving in all directions, and a tongue came and settled on each person there. The Holy Spirit took control of everyone, and they began speaking whatever language the Spirit let them speak” (2:1-4).

Since ancient times, the 50-day period from Pascha to Pentecost has been called Pentecost because what began with the Lord breathing the Holy Spirit on His Disciples was consummated with the full descent of the Spirit upon the Disciples and the whole Church. Thus, the Church was fully born and began to grow.

During this period, all fasting and kneeling is prohibited as a tangible confession of the Resurrection of Christ. It is only on the actual day of Pentecost that kneeling is resumed, and is connected with a special kneeling ceremony (akolouthia gonyklesias),

which consists of prayers for the gift of the Holy Spirit, hence the name, "Kneeling Day" (*tes gonatistes*) for Pentecost.

Later on, another week was added to these 50 days in order to celebrate the post-feast (metheorta) of the Feast of Pentecost. Thus, today the period of movable Feasts after Pascha spans eight weeks, to include the Sunday of All Saints (Agion Panton), and is divided into three parts:

1. The 40 post-festal days of Pascha,
2. The Feast of the Ascension, together with its post-festal period, and
3. The Feast of Pentecost together with its own post-festal period.

2. The second Sunday after Pascha is called the Sunday of the Myrrh-Bearing Women (Kyriake ton Myroforon). It is dedicated to the women who brought myrrh to the tomb of Christ. It is also dedicated to the secret disciples of the Lord, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, who arranged for and assisted in the Lord's burial. This is clearly commemorated in the Gospel lesson for the day (Mark 15.43-16.8).

The Myrrh-Bearing Women we can identify from the Holy Gospels are Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, (a.k.a., Mary of Clopas, Joanna the wife of Huza, a guardian of Herod Antipas, Salome the mother of the sons of Zebedee, and Sozanna).

Joseph of Arimathea (a city of Judaea) was a rich nobleman and a member of the Sanhedrin (a council deputy in Jerusalem). He was the one who did not agree with the council's decision against Christ. He was also the one who bravely asked Pontius Pilate for the body of Christ (Matthew 27.57-60, Mark 15.42-47, Luke 23.50-56, John 19.38-42). Nicodemus was a Jewish leader, a Pharisee, who was well read in the Scriptures and visited Christ by night (John 3.1-21 and 19.39-42).

All these sacred persons clearly demonstrate to us that people from all walks of life can be disciples of the Lord and enjoy the privilege of taking care of His body and become primary witnesses of the Lord's mighty Resurrection.

3. The following three Sundays are known, in order, as the Sunday of the Paralytic, the Sunday of the Samaritan Woman, and the Sunday of the Man Born Blind, because of the Gospel readings and the hymns prescribed for them. The incidents commemorated in these feasts all demonstrate the divine authority, identity and power of Christ, which were then fully revealed by his Resurrection.

The healing of the paralytic at the pool of Bethesda or Bethsaida (John 5.1-18) shows Christ's authority over the Sabbath because it was on the Sabbath day that He healed the paralytic.

The conversation of the Lord with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well near Sychar (John 4:3-42) reaches its high point when the Lord discloses his identity:

"I am the One [the Christ] Who is speaking to you now" (4:26).

At the end of the story, the Samaritans openly declare,

"We are certain that He is the Savior of the world" (4:42).

Finally, the healing of the blind man (John 9:1-41) demonstrates the divine power of Christ and the fact that He came from God:

"This is the first time in history that anyone has ever given sight to someone born blind. Jesus could not do anything unless He came from God" (9:32).

4. The Wednesday after the Sunday of the Paralytic falls exactly in the middle of the 50 days of the period of Pentecost and is consequently called Mid-Pentecost (*Mesopentekoste*). It is a Festal Day, and according to ancient custom, it draws its meaning from the Gospel prescribed for it (John 7:14-30). This Gospel lesson contains the speech of the Lord made in the Temple, in the middle of the feast of the Tabernacles (*Skenopegias*), which explains His authority over the Sabbath in terms of the divine origin of both His teaching and His existence. Central to this are the Lord's words to the people of Jerusalem:

"I did not come on My own. The One Who sent Me is truthful, and you do not know Him. But I know the One Who sent Me, because I came from Him" (7:28).

Also central are the words the Lord uttered on the last day of the Feast which anticipate the Outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost:

"If you are thirsty, come to Me and drink! Have faith in Me, and you will have life-giving water flowing from deep inside you" (7:37).

The hymns of this Feast recall the miracles of the Lord, which demonstrate His Godhead, and admonish the Christians

"to keep steadfastly the commandments of the Lord in order to become worthy to celebrate his Ascension and to participate in the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Doxastikon ton Aion).

5. On the Wednesday after the Sunday of the Man Born Blind (the 6th Sunday after Pascha), we celebrate the Return (apodosis), or completion, of the post-festal period of Pascha. The services of the day, which include a paschal liturgy, are sung in a

manner identical to that of the New Week. This is actually the 39th day after Pascha, the eve of the Ascension Day, when we sing the Resurrection Hymn, *Christos Anesti*, and exchange the Resurrection greeting for the last time.

6. On the following day, which is the 40th day after Pascha, the Ascension of the Lord into Heaven is commemorated. The feast of the Ascension (*Anapipseos*) is explicitly mentioned in the fourth century, but its origins most probably go back to the preceding centuries. The ancient church manual, *Apostolic Constitutions*, makes the following comment about it:

“Again counting 40 days after the first Sunday, you must celebrate from Sunday until Thursday the feast of the Ascension of the Lord, in which He fulfilled the whole economy and design of our salvation, ascended to God the Father, Who had sent Him, and sat at the right hand of the Power to wait until His enemies are placed under his feet” (*Book V, chapter 20*).

The feast of the Ascension, then, marks the end and the sealing of the work of the Lord on Earth, as well as the Ascension of human nature to heaven and consequently foreshadows the forthcoming Gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. It is celebrated until the Friday of the following week, when it is returned (and therefore closed).

The meaning of the Lord’s Ascension is also connected with His eternal priesthood. The Epistle to the Hebrews sums it up as follows:

“We have a Great High Priest Who has gone into Heaven, Jesus the Son of God” (4:14)... Jesus has gone there (behind the curtain and into the most holy place) ahead of us, and He is our High Priest forever, just like Melchizedek (6:20)... Jesus will never die, and so He will be a Priest forever. He is forever able to save the people He leads to God because He always lives to speak to God for them. Jesus is the High Priest we need (7:24-26)... He is the perfect High Priest forever (7:28)... who sits at the right side of God’s great throne in heaven (8:1).”

7. The Sunday, Sunday of the Holy Fathers, which falls in the middle of the festal period of the Ascension (the 7th Sunday after Pascha), is dedicated to the 318 Holy Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (325 AD) and is consequently known as the Sunday of the Holy Fathers (*Ton Pateron*).

The Gospel of this day comes from the Lord’s High Priestly Prayer for the unity of Christians found in John 17:1-13. The Church ordered the commemoration of the Fathers on this particular Sunday because the Eparchial Synods, which were summoned

for the purpose of dealing with various local matters, usually met during the Pentecostal period.

Successors of the Apostles, the Fathers, have kept the apostolic faith through their teachings. The Kontakion of the Feast puts this most eloquently and clearly:

“The preaching of the Apostles and the dogmas of the Fathers sealed one faith for the Church which, wearing the garment of truth waved with theology from above, rightly dispenses and glorifies the great mystery of piety.”

The Saturday before Pentecost is a Saturday of the Souls (Psychosabbaton), and prayers are offered for those who fell asleep that they, too, may become worthy through our prayers of the Pentecostal gift, which is commemorated the next day.

8. The Christian feast of Pentecost corresponds to the Hebrew feast which bears the same name, and in which the first fruits of Israel’s new crops were offered to God (Protogennemata).

The Christian feast commemorates the first fruits of the preaching of the Apostles, which followed the descent of the Holy Spirit upon them on the day of Pentecost, and on account of which the first Christian Church was born and established with three thousand souls. Ever since Pentecost, the Spirit abides in the Church and regulates the Church’s life and growth. The Spirit brings the entire constitution of the Church together as the Body of Christ. As the Comforter (Parakletos), He is the pledge of Christ’s return and final victory with the entire body of the Church.

The celebration of this feast goes back to apostolic times. According to ancient custom, catechumens were baptized on this occasion and therefore, even today, no Trisagion is sung during the Liturgy. Instead, the hymn

“Those baptized into Christ, have put on Christ,” (Gal. 3:27) is sung.

The vespers of this day, following immediately after the Divine Liturgy, is especially notable because of the long kneeling supplication, which is offered after the Entrance. This supplication is the first of several which follow after the feast, having been previously suspended during the Pentecostal Period.

Pentecost is celebrated throughout the week and is returned on the following Saturday. The Monday of the post-festal period is distinguished from the other post-festal days because it is dedicated to the Holy Spirit (*Deftera tou Agiou Pneumatos*). The services of the day follow the pattern of the preceding Pentecostal Sunday. Fasting is not observed during the week of (after) Pentecost.

The Doxastikon hymn of the day is the well-known prayer with which most Church services begin and which is used by many Orthodox Christians as a first Prayer of each day:

"Heavenly King, Comforter, Spirit of Truth, present everywhere and filling all things, come and abide in us; cleanse us from every stain and save our souls Gracious Lord."

9. The Sunday after Pentecost is known as the Sunday of All Saints. It is a very ancient feast mentioned at the end of the fourth century and seems to have been initially instituted as a feast in honor of all the Martyrs.

The Church always honored the Martyrs. Since honoring the Martyrs was originally a local affair, however, many of the Martyrs were unknown, and it is probably for this reason that such a feast was instituted to honor all Martyrs, known and unknown. This feast was placed very appropriately after Pentecost because the Church was watered and increased through the witness and blood of the Martyrs. Later, when the Church honored others as Saints besides the Martyrs, the moveable feast after Pascha acquired a more general character and was changed into a feast in honor of all the Saints.

10. The Feast of the Holy Apostles. On the Monday after the Sunday of All Saints, a fast is observed for the Feast of the Holy Apostles. Originally, this was a weekly fast as it is explicitly stated in the Apostolic Constitutions (Book V, chapter 20). Later on, it was connected with the feast of the Holy Apostles (June 29-30) and was extended to the whole period from the Monday after the Sunday of All Saints to the 28th of June.