

Pentecost Sunday 6/8/14

Brother and Sisters in Christ

The Holy Spirit has descended!

This feast of Pentecost is the last of the Church's celebrations of what it calls 'The Divine Economy', the great work of God to restore humanity to its originally intended condition. This 'Divine Economy' occurs through the incarnation of the word of God as the God/Man Jesus Christ. The feast of the Annunciation commemorates the beginning of the incarnation while Pentecost is the completion since it is then that man, through the descent of the Holy Spirit, becomes a member of the risen body of Christ.

Everything that Christ did in His sojourn upon the earth was directed to this end. Again and again we have been reminded by the story of Adam and Eve how it was that human nature, our nature, was cut off from its intimate communion with God's Holy Spirit. The work of the 'Divine Economy' has as its ultimate end the restitution of this union. Today's commemoration celebrates this restoration, the first re-opening of the paradise that was lost and closed to human beings. From that great day until the end of the world, the door to the kingdom of heaven stands wide open to all who would enter therein.

The Church's response to the great gift of God's love is beautifully and meaningfully expressed in the wonderful hymn to the Holy Spirit, "O Heavenly King". It is sung at the beginning of virtually every church service during the year. Let's take a few minutes to reflect upon the words and meaning of this prayer which we hear again today for the first time since Pascha, so that when we sing it together we may do so both with a greater awareness and with greater gladness.

"O Heavenly King"

The Holy Spirit is neither an impersonal power, like electricity, or a 'life force' like the 'force' in Star Wars. He is a personal being and one of the 'three kings' of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He is thus co-ruler of the created universe. In the Old Testament the Hebrews in their folly desired a

worldly king but with the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the Kingdom of God is restored in the New Israel, the Church. This prayer is our daily pledge of allegiance, like they have in the public schools.

“Comforter, Spirit of Truth”

Although He is absolute ruler of all creation, God has given to human beings the freedom of rational and moral personhood. This is a burden of responsibility that most people find rather hard to bear. We find the whole experience of existence/life very confusing and often painful. Unlike worldly rulers, good or bad, who bring about order by force, the Heavenly King beckons but does not force allegiance. Our freedom is respected even when we behave disrespectfully. St. John the Evangelist urges Christians not to sin. But then he says even if they do sin, they should not be discouraged because, “we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense – Jesus Christ”, and it is Jesus who says, “I will ask the Father and He will give you another Comforter to be with you forever – the Spirit of Truth”. Consolation is a common action of the Triune God.

“Who Art Everywhere Present and Fillest All Things”

Here we recognize and acknowledge that by His Life the Holy Spirit sustains the entire creation. Therefore there is no place that is unreachable by the Holy Spirit – especially no ‘place’ of sickness, sorrow or sin within ourselves or each other that cannot be touched and consoled by the Comforter. One of the great truths that we learn as Christians is that there is no failing or shameful thing that must remain concealed out of fear that we will be rejected.

“Treasury of Good Gifts”

All of God’s gifts are good. The good gifts of the Holy Spirit have to do with the nature of the created order, with the nature of reality itself. To each creature He bestows and sustains its particular nature. For mankind this includes the true undistorted nature of humanity. It is only by the Holy Spirit that we can learn the truth of who and what we are. He is the one who will teach us all things.

All of this prayer up to this point has been in the nature of a recollection about who it is that we are petitioning. From this point on the hymn formulates our petition itself. It does so in three phrases that make up one desire upon which we set our hopes and all of our most noble and humane expectations.

“Come and Abide in Us”

Only human beings have the God-given freedom to accept or reject the full potential of the meaning and purpose of their existences. God will not invade or dominate our persons, the way men seek to invade or dominate others. He must be invited into our hearts. Of course for the Orthodox Christian, the Holy Spirit already ‘abides in us’ through our Baptisms and Chrismation. What we are saying here is more in the nature of expressing our willingness to cooperate with the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

“And Cleanse Us of All Impurity”

Our inner world, the realm of our hearts, the deep center of our personal existences is polluted, even after Baptism, with half-truths, lies and destructive passions. Just as at Confession, (the second Baptism), we are absolved and forgiven but not completely healed. Forgiveness is not the end but the necessary beginning of our spiritual healing and transformation. This healing, the cleansing of all impurity is the penultimate objective and work of the Holy Spirit in the heart. This healing is ongoing requiring our constant re-commitment to cooperation with the Holy Spirit. For unlike the Holy Spirit, we often allow ourselves to be distracted, sometimes by mere trifles. We also easily, lack consistent courage and sometimes lose sight of our purpose so completely that we fall into despondency and even despair. We need God’s help, not once in a while, but consistently if we ever hope to become the kind of people who will fit in and feel ‘at home’ in the Eternal Kingdom. So we conclude our hymn thusly.

“And Save Our Souls O Good One”

The fruit of the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts is salvation. St. Paul tells us in his letter to the Galatians what this fruit looks like when it ripens in human beings: “Love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

gentleness, self-control". Until such fruit characterizes the condition of our hearts, our souls and finds expression in our relationships with others, we cannot, we dare not, consider ourselves 'saved'. Thus we must ever stir up the gift that is in us.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, do you see now why almost every service, except those of the Paschal Season, begins with this hymn, this great prayer? For Orthodox Christians it is principally through participation in the collective worship of the Church that this gift of the Holy Spirit is 'stirred up' – the Trisagion prayers that begin almost every service and also our private prayers also begin with 'O Heavenly King'.

We have been given a great and holy gift. Today we celebrate the giving

For the Holy Spirit has Descended!