

7th Sunday of Pascha

June 16, 2013

First Ecumenical Council

Beloved in the Lord – Christ has Ascended!

We are in that very special time between the Feast of the Ascension and the Feast of Pentecost. It is important for us to understand the message of the Church's focus here if we expect to participate fruitfully in the life of the Church. I am happy to notice that some of you have been taking my advice about preparation for Church Services. Particularly, some have mentioned how reading ahead about the theme of each Sunday or special feast and also the saints commemorated has helped you to hear and connect more effectively with what is being sung or chanted in Church. This is exactly right. If today is the first time you are thinking about the Ascension, about Pentecost or about the First Ecumenical Council, you are late for class. Not too late, we hope, but late nevertheless. So, listen up.

This Sunday already belongs to the sphere of ideas connected to the Feast of Pentecost which the Church celebrates next Sunday. We heard an allusion to this in today's Epistle reading where St. Paul is 'hurrying' to be back in Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost. We also heard in the Gospels for Ascension how Jesus told his Disciples to wait in Jerusalem until they received 'power from on high'. Thus for the Church, this time between Ascension and Pentecost is always a time of expectant waiting.

By her commemoration of the First Ecumenical Council during this time of waiting, the Church provides for us a profound and insightful guide as to how we might use this time to our souls' advantage. As I'm sure we all know, it was at this Council almost 1700 years ago that the symbol of our Orthodox Faith, the Nicene Creed, was first established. We confess this symbol of our faith in the daily prayers and services and at every Divine Liturgy. In a short time we will confess it together today. But, how long has it been since we spent any time reflecting upon the meaning of the words we are saying or singing? Also, we might ask, what connection is there between the awaited Feast of Pentecost and these beliefs that are confessed over and over again, so often that most of us could repeat them in our sleep, and some of us, we must admit, sleep while repeating them.

Well, consider this. Before a person can be received into the Orthodox Church, he or she, (or in the case of an infant, their sponsor), must stand before the doors of the Church and confess the beliefs articulated by this symbol of faith. Before their personal Pentecost of Baptism, Chrismation and Holy Communion can take place. The Ecclesia or Church has always affirmed a necessary connection between right worship, right living and right belief. All of

these together comprise what we call Orthodoxy or right glorification of God. The gifting of the Holy Spirit is thus understood as somewhat dependent on our belief. With this in mind, it might be a good idea to do some mental spring cleaning as a preparation for Pentecost.

Take for example the declaration "I believe in one, Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church". If ever there was a statement that flies in the face of modernist ideal about religion it is this one! We have all experienced and will continue to experience a relentless pressure to compromise the apparently 'intolerant' and 'non-inclusive' nature of this declaration. It is one thing to experience this pressure from the world. It is quite another thing to experience it from within one's own conscience.

Many of the Fathers have used the analogy of a ship or boat for the Ecclesia, the Church. Thinking in this way, they often describe the doctrines of our faith as the planks of siding that keep the waters of falsehood and of untruth from swamping the boat. Still, as every boat owner discovers, water keeps getting in. So it is with us. Some of us are sitting in half-sunk boats wondering why it seems so hard to get anywhere. The water has gotten in. We must bail it out and also try to find the leak.

Let us return to our test case for Orthodox Doctrine, the existence and nature of the Church itself. I am only going to touch upon one false idea about the Church. There are others but one will do for an example. This is the idea, popular amongst virtually all Protestants, that the Church is an 'invisible' spiritual entity made up of those who sincerely love Jesus – regardless of what they believe about Him. The importance of doctrine is diminished, sometimes to the point of non-existence and is replaced with enthusiasm, emotionalism, psychological support and political ideology. This idea is, of course, the precursor to the modernist doctrine that all religions are basically the same. That at best they all point imperfectly to a noble human aspiration and at worst are all obstructionist hold-over's from primitive and less evolved societies. All of this is in irreconcilable conflict with the Orthodox teaching of the Church as a spiritual/physical community of persons, consecrated to a real, personal God, with an identifiable and definitive doctrine, way of worship and concrete history within the history of the world.

The presence of this doctrine of the 'invisible church', coupled with the relativist modern spirit, creates a real problem for Orthodox Christians living in today's society. These ideas have become so unchallengeably accepted in the popular mind that the person who expresses a different opinion is in danger of being regarded as a bad person – close minded, intolerant, self-righteous, bigoted and probably a hating, hater who hates. No one likes being thought of this way with the possible exception of various Christian forms of the Taliban. Sadly the Orthodox have these men and women also.

For most of us however, being regarded as a pariah by our fellow citizens very uncomfortable, doubly so for our children and youth. This discomfort can create great pressure on our beliefs and can create a desire to somehow compromise foundational truths, that cannot not be compromised without causing damage to our faith as a whole. Little by little this pressure can wear us down and without knowing how we find ourselves in a very leaky boat.

I am not going to try and give you neat solutions to problems like this – not that I don't want to, but I can't. These are things that we must confront, not in others, or for others, but in ourselves. Parroting other people's wisdom will not help us much, although their wisdom can help us acquire wisdom and strength of our own. This is our struggle. No one can do this for us.

This is just one example of how the 'spirit of our times' can assault our Orthodoxy and rob us of the power from on high that is God's gift to those who will confess Him as He has revealed Himself in the Gospel. In this time of waiting for both the Celebration of the first gifting of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and hopefully the renewal of that power from on high in our own lives, let us do some maintenance upon the integrity of our Faith by taking the Doctrines of the Creed into some serious contemplation. If we do this, I am sure that we will come to the Feast of Pentecost with a much greater ability to receive 'power from on high'.

May God grant it.

Amen