

The Fast and the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul

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Having celebrated the feast of feasts, the Lord's Pascha, and Pentecost fifty days thereafter, we are about to embark upon the Apostles' Fast, which this year begins on June 12th and ends with the commemoration of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul on June 29th.

The Apostles' Fast is a prescribed fasting period of the Church, lasting from the day after the Sunday of All Saints to the 29th of June, the feast of the Apostles Peter and Paul.

It is a sad truth that many neglect this particular fast for a variety of reasons inconsistent with the apostolic and patristic tradition. Prior to reflecting upon the importance of the Apostles' Fast, a review of the ancient history of this particular fast may help us to recognize its integral place in the life of each and every Orthodox Christian.

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 Cyrrhus regarding it. The oldest testimony regarding the Apostles' Fast is given to us by St. Athanasius the Great (†373).

In her Diary, the pilgrim Egeria (fourth century) records that on the day following the feast of Pentecost a period of fasting began. The Apostolic Constitutions, a work composed no later than 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 lasting 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 Peter and Paul on June 29. In the first centuries, after Pentecost there was one week of rejoicing, that is a fast-free week, followed by about one week of fasting.

The canons of Nicephoros, Patriarch of Constantinople (806-816), mention the Apostle's Fast. The Typicon of St. Theodore the Studite for the Monastery of Studios in Constantinople speaks of the Forty Days Fast of the holy Apostles. St. Symeon of Thessalonica (†1429) 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 spiritual benefit derived from the Apostles' Fast is great. Saint Leo the Great noted that, "After the extended feast of Pentecost, the fast is particularly needed in order to cleanse our mind by ascetic labors, and to make us worthy of the gifts of the Holy Spirit." Saint Leo also reminds us, "In the Apostolic canons inspired by God Himself, the Church fathers have, at the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, established first and foremost that all virtuous labors begin with fasting."

Periods of fasting such as the one upon which we are about to embark are not, as some in the West would have us believe, exercises in mortification or penance but the divinely inspired method to gain

mastery over the self and conquer the passions of the flesh. It is to liberate oneself from dependence on the things of this world in order to concentrate on the things of the Kingdom of God. It is to give power to the soul so that it would not yield to temptation and sin. According to St. Seraphim of Sarov, fasting is an “indispensable means” of gaining the fruit of the Holy Spirit in one's life (cf. Conversation with Motovilov), and Jesus Himself taught that some forms of evil cannot be conquered without it (Matthew 17:21, Mark 9:29)

Neglecting the fast is not the only pitfall to be avoided however. Those who fast may be tempted to judge those who do not fast, thus losing the efficacy of their labors. We should not concern ourselves with what others are doing but concentrate on our own spiritual life.

Fasting periods, particularly the Apostles' Fast, assist us in avoiding the spiritual pitfalls to which we are so accustomed after the ascetical struggle of Great Lent and the joyous celebration of Pascha.

In turning our attention to the feast of the holy apostles Peter and Paul, the connection between the feast of Pentecost, the Apostles' Fast, and the actual feast of the two preeminent apostles becomes clearer. As I noted earlier, this fast was originally connected to the feast of Pentecost and we understand this connection by examining the feast itself. As Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos writes,

Pentecost had a significant place in the life of the Apostles. Having previously passed through purification of the heart and illumination – something that also existed in the Old Testament in the Prophets and the righteous – they then saw the Risen Christ, and on the day of Pentecost they became members of the risen Body of Christ. This is particularly important because every Apostle had to have the Risen Christ within Him. At Pentecost the Holy Spirit made the Disciples members of the theanthropic Body of Christ. Whereas at the Transfiguration the Light acted from within the three Disciples, through glorification, but the Body of Christ was outside them, at Pentecost the Disciples are united with Christ. They become members of the theanthropic Body and as members of the Body of Christ they share in the uncreated Light. This difference also exists between the Old Testament and Pentecost. . . In addition, on the day of Pentecost, the Disciples attained to “all truth”. Before His Passion, Christ told His Disciples: “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth” (John 16:12-13).

These words of Christ are closely linked with the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, with the revelation of the whole truth, which the Disciples were unable to bear; they could not receive it earlier, without the Holy Spirit.

This “all truth” revealed on the day of Pentecost to the Apostles is the truth of the Church as the Body of Christ: that the Disciples will become members of this risen Body and that in the Church they will know the mysteries of the glory and rule (*vasileia*) of God in the flesh of Christ. On the day of Pentecost they knew the whole truth. It follows that the complete truth does not exist outside the Church. The Church has the truth, because it is the Body of Christ and a community of glorification.

As the foremost of the holy apostles, it is fitting that after the feast of Pentecost, wherein the apostles received the revelation of truth in its fullness, we commemorate Saints Peter and Paul jointly. As Saint Gregory Palamas writes in his sermon on the occasion of the saints' feast,

If, as we have said, we commemorate each of the saints with hymns and appropriate songs of praise, how much more should we celebrate the memory of Peter and Paul, the supreme Leaders of the pre-eminent company of the Apostles? They are the fathers and guides of all Christians: Apostles, martyrs, holy ascetics, priests, hierarchs, pastors and teachers. As chief shepherds and master builders of our common godliness and virtue, they tend and teach us all, like lights in the world, holding forth the word of life (Phil. 2:15-16). Their brightness excels that of the other radiantly pious and virtuous saints as the sun outshines the stars, or as the heavens, which declare the sublime glory of God (cf. Ps. 19:1), transcend the skies. In their order and strength they are greater than the heavens, more beautiful than the stars, and swifter than both, and as regards what lies beyond the realm of the senses, it is they who reveal things which surpass the very heavens themselves and indeed the whole universe, and who make them bright with the light in which there is no variableness neither shadow of turning (cf. Jas. 1:17). Not only do they bring people out of darkness into this wonderful light, but by enlightening them they make them light, the offspring of the perfect light, that each of them may shine like the sun (Matt. 13:43), when the Author of light, the God-man and Word, appears in glory.

On the day of Pentecost, the apostles received the fullness of the revelation of truth because the Lord Christ had prepared them for the advent of the Comforter. As the preeminent apostles, Saints Peter and Paul were the guardians of that truth which was to be passed on to the faithful. Saint Seraphim of Sarov tells us, "The true aim of our Christian life consists of the acquisition of the Holy Spirit of God. As for fasts, and vigils, and prayer, and almsgiving, and every good deed done for Christ's sake, are the only means of acquiring the Holy Spirit of God."

We know from Holy Scripture and Tradition that the Holy Spirit does not abide in a vessel that is not being purified. Saint Luke of Crimea notes, "For could the Holy Spirit possibly abide in an impure heart that is filled with sin? As smoke chases away the bees, as stench repels all people, so does the stench of the human heart repel the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit lives only in pure hearts, and only to them does he grant He Divine grace, His holy gifts, for He is the 'Treasury of good things'—all the true and most precious goods that the human heart could possibly possess. Could the impure heart receive them? Could the heart that is sinful and deprived of mercy and love possibly receive the grace of the Holy Spirit?"

This is precisely why, in her wisdom, the holy Church offers us the period of the Apostles' Fast soon after Pentecost and just prior to the feast of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul who were worthy to receive the Holy Spirit. If the aim of the Christian life is the acquisition of the Holy Spirit, we must engage in the struggle through fasting and continual prayer. It is only then that we may acquire the Holy Spirit and can properly appreciate and be joyous in the feast of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul.