

The Gift of the Holy Spirit

Fifty days after Christ's Resurrection on the Feast of Feasts—Pascha, we celebrate the Feast of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended upon the Apostles. This day marks the birthday of the Christian Church on earth, the Church that our Lord said He would build and the gates of hell would not prevail against.

“The word Pentecost (meaning ‘fiftieth in Greek) appears twice in the Old Testament as one of the designations of the feast of weeks” In Exodus 34:22 we read, “You shall observe the Feast of Weeks, the firstfruits of wheat harvest, and the Feast of Ingathering at the year’s end.” Again, in Deuteronomy 16:10, it says “Then you shall keep the Feast of Weeks to the Lord your God, and according to your ability you may offer whatever you wish, as the Lord your God blessed you.” Later, after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D., the feast began to lose its agricultural association and became linked with Israel’s sacred history by celebrating the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai.” *from The Oxford Companion to the Bible, Metzger & Coogan*

During these fifty days after Christ's Resurrection, the Holy Apostles waited for the coming of the Holy Spirit as our Lord asked them to do. Liturgically, we do not use the prayer, O Heavenly King, until the Feast of Pentecost. This is because we too are waiting for the Holy Spirit to descend on the Day of Pentecost just as those first Apostles did.

“In his sermon on Pentecost, St. Peter quotes the well-known prophecy of Joel, “I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh (Joel 3:1). This promise was significant because under the old covenant, the gift of the Spirit had been given only to a few—the patriarchs, the prophets, and some of the judges. Certain leaders of Israel were indwelt with the Holy Spirit to accomplish their tasks. Joel, however, prophesied that the Holy Spirit would be given to all God’s people, “all flesh.” This was fulfilled at Pentecost, for Peter exclaims, “this [outpouring of the Spirit] is what was spoken by the prophet Joel” (in Acts 2:16)...The last words of Christ before His Ascension include a promise: “John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now” (Acts 1:5). This word was fulfilled ten days later on the Day of Pentecost. How is the Holy Spirit given to us? The people who heard Peter speak at Pentecost asked him how they might receive salvation. He answered, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:38) We repent (turn away from our sins and toward Christ); we are baptized; we are given “the gift of the Holy Spirit,” chrismation...The promise of God includes both our union with Christ in Holy Baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit at chrismation.” *from The Orthodox Study Bible*

St. Nicholai Velimirovich once said that just as the vigil lamp cannot be lit without our hand, so too, our heart, our inward vigil lamp, cannot be lit without the holy fire of God's grace, even if it were to be filled with all the virtues. All these virtues of ours are, after all, like combustible material, but the fire which ignites them proceeds from God.