

Pastoral Letter on Pentecost.

June 3/16, 2019

On the Eve of the radiant day of Pentecost, I thought I might try to write small letter to you. It is for my flock, in the church, in the prison, and anyone who might listen in social media. I am not trying to write anything eloquent, but only something from my heart to your heart. **Without Pentecost there is no fulfillment of Pascha.** We must understand the moral implications of Pentecost. What follows is perhaps a little bit of a meandering eclectic and contemplative catechism about Pentecost

The feast of Pentecost commemorates when the Holy Spirit came down upon the apostles and subsequently to everyone in the entire church. The Holy Spirit manifested Himself as tongues of fire over their heads, and enlightened them, and to this day He enlightens all who desire to have Him within their deep heart.

This feast occurs exactly 50 days after Pascha. In the Jewish law, the feast of Pentecost was to commemorate the giving of the law. The Christian Pentecost supersedes that earlier feast, and is to help us fulfill the law. Christianity is to fulfill the law of God. In our day we have people who define themselves as Christians and yet do not attempt to fulfill God's law. This is an abomination. We are made for perfection; one cannot be perfect without striving for perfection. We also cannot become perfect on our own, so therefore the Holy Spirit is given to us, to guide us in everything.

Why do I say we are made for perfection? We were made in the image of God in order to obtain His likeness. I teach about that almost every day, because it is the beginning of everything. God made man so that man could share in the life of the Holy Trinity. It is impossible for someone who is impure to be in the presence of the fire of God and not be burned up, therefore Jesus Christ became man and showed us the way of life, and arranged for this way of life to be taught in the church, and for us to have a path to perfection. We are not required to be perfected on our own. That is absolutely impossible, and the church understands that the true path of life is to perfection, and it is only possible because of the guidance of the Holy Spirit. How can it not be? If we are made in the image of God, then we share in His attributes, even though we are full of sin. Since God is perfect and simple and holy, we were made also to be these things. The path to becoming these things is by the grace of God, and our effort. The Holy Spirit helps us in all of these things by enlightening us and strengthening us, and helping us to have courage when we are weak, and teaching us when we are ignorant, and comforting us when we are downcast.

The Holy Spirit speaks to us in a secret way, in groanings that cannot be uttered by human language ("Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered." Rom 8:26) We must learn to think spiritually and act spiritually. This is a learned skill. It does not come about passively; it only comes about by our activity, being helped by the mercy of God in everything.

Now, I want to merely comment about some of the texts from the service of Pentecost. Everyone who cares about their soul should get a hold of these texts and read them multiple times, and read them every year. The Pentecostarion, which contains the feast of Pentecost and Pascha and all the feasts in between, is not that

expensive. If you do not have the funds for the Pentecostarion, then these texts can be obtained online. I have them on my computer.

“Come, O ye people, let us worship the Godhead in Three Persons: the Son in the Father, with the Holy Spirit; for the Father before all time begat the Son Co-ever-existing and Co-enthroned, and the Holy Spirit was in the Father, glorified together with the Son; One Might, One Substance, One Godhead. In worshipping Whom let us all say: O Holy God, Who madest all things by the Son, through the co-operation of the Holy Spirit; Holy Mighty, through Whom we have known the Father, and through Whom the Holy Spirit came into the world; Holy Immortal, the Comforting Spirit, Who proceedest from the Father, and restest in the Son: O Holy Trinity, glory to Thee!” *Doxasticon for the feast, in Tone VIII —*

This hymn is from the Vespers service. It basically explains the prayer that we should be saying every day in our daily prayers, the so-called “Trisagion”. That prayer is: “Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us”. You can see from the hymn above that the Trisagion is referring specifically to each of the persons of the Holy Trinity.

We live in a non-dogmatic age. People can call themselves Christians and not even understand the doctrine of the Trinity, and not care! We who are Orthodox Christians really do care. We were born to know God, and we cannot know Him unless we know Him as He truly is. Therefore, all of our services glorify the Holy Trinity, and there are many hymns such as this one that are very explicit. The reason why we must be explicit about our worship is because God is Who He is, and we were born to know Him. If we think we know Him and think we know something else about Him that is not true, we are not believing in Him correctly. One cannot make progress in the spiritual life if one does not believe in God correctly. Of course, correct belief is not just knowing facts that are true; it is always living according to those facts that are true.

The following is a portion of the first reading from Vespers. In many great feasts, there are three Old Testament readings, called “parables”. This first one should touch our heart deeply. Our theology is not something that is cold it’s and bare. It is not something just to be memorized and “stated”. It is something that must bring comfort to us. A characteristic of human life is that we sometimes feel alone. We sometimes feel overwhelmed. If a person is struggling for virtue, they will always have moments of feeling overmatched, and overwhelmed. If you never have this feeling, then you are not struggling enough. One of the names of the Holy Spirit is the “Comforter”. This comfort is a spiritual comfort. It means that we are not alone, and that our weakness is made strong by the Spirit. I think the following excerpt embodies that comfort.

“And I will come down and talk with thee there; and I will take of the Spirit which is upon thee, and will put it upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with thee, that thou bear it not thyself alone. ...”

“But there remained two of the men in the camp, the name of the one was Eldad, and the name of the other Modad, and the Spirit rested upon them, and they were of them that were written, but went not out unto the Tabernacle, and they prophesied in the camp. And there ran a young man, and told Moses and said: Eldad and Modad do prophesy in the camp. And Joshua the son of Nun, who attended on Moses, one of his young men, answered and said: My lord Moses, forbid them. And Moses said unto him: Enviest thou for my sake? Would to God that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them.” (full reading: Numbers 11:16-17, 24-29)

I included the second part of this reading, above, because I’ve encountered many, including myself who because of life situations, have felt weak and unable to do what we want to do. Sometimes we, for some reason, believe that we are too insignificant for God. The experience of Eldad and Modad shows that God will help anyone who seeks Him. Of course, we must understand this teaching in an Orthodox way. We cannot be arch-ecumenists and say that truth does not matter, or that how we conduct ourselves in our lives does not matter, or our sexual orientation, and our sexual practices, or whatever else, does not matter. We must live according to the law of God as best we can, and no one is insignificant according to God. According to man, most people are insignificant. They are too poor, or too sick, or too weak to order their affairs as they would want, because there are those that are richer than them, and healthier, and more powerful. That is in the world, but in the Holy Trinity, all men are loved the same.

The second reading of Vespers is very famous, and many know of it, but does this knowledge affect your life? The world is full of favoritism, and there is no full and true justice. God is perfectly just. He will give his Spirit to any who seek Him honestly, and with a good heart. My experience with many prisoners, and also with people that are in a different kind of prison in the so-called “free world”, is that they feel insignificant and marginalized, and don’t fully understand that God does not abide by any of the apparent “rules” of the world.

All God requires of you is that you try! The ending of this reading reminds me of the words of Christ: “He who endures to the end will be saved” (Cf. Matthew 10:22). We just need a little more endurance, a little more patience. We can do that today, and when tomorrow comes, the Holy Spirit will help us to do it tomorrow also. We are not required to tomorrow’s work today. That would overwhelm us. We are just required to struggle, to be a little bit more patient, and the Comforter will comfort us.

“And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out My Spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams and your young men shall see visions. For upon My servants and upon My handmaids in those days will I pour out My Spirit and they shall prophesy. And I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs upon the earth below, blood and fire and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord come. And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” [Joel 2:23-32]

The last reading from Vespers should also be very comforting. It is not just comforting, but it is also an “instruction manual”. All of the promises of Scripture are like this. Even when Scripture does not explicitly give us commands, we must understand commands within it.

For instance, this reading tells us that the Holy Spirit will help us to be clean of our filthiness and to be cleansed, and have a new heart and a new Spirit in our heart, which will no longer be stony but will be of flesh (that is, fully alive and active in the virtues). And we are further promised that God will help us to walk in His statutes and keep His judgments and do them. Those are not just promises; they are also commands.

We are to live in a way that is spiritual. We are to search out to do things that are clean and not filthy, and not have a stony heart but one that is soft and open to God’s mercy and to giving mercy to others. If we react to someone in some way that is “stony”, and there are so many ways to do this – anger, passive aggressiveness, judging, gossip, or even just forgetting to pray for someone that is bothering us, we are acting as if we have a stony heart. If we are saying that we must do such and such to survive, and we are not thinking of our brother, we have a stony heart. Do you sometimes feel that you have stony heart? Do you want to have a new heart? The Holy Spirit will give you this heart, but only with your permission and your activity.

“Thus saith the Lord: I will take you from among the heathen, and gather you out of all countries, and will bring you into your own land; then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean; from all your filthiness and from all your idols will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new Spirit will I put within you; and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh, and I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in My statutes, and ye shall keep My judgments and do them. And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and ye shall be My people, and I will be your God.” [Ezekiel 36:24-28]

Those who know me well know that I love to speak of various “definitions” of salvation. Do you see the definition of salvation, above? It is a beautiful promise: our stony heart will become a heart of flesh, and our empty and deep heart will be full of the Holy Spirit, and we will no longer sin but be able to walk in all of God’s statutes and His judgments and He will call us His people. All of that is worth fighting for, very much.

There are many more hymns from the Pentecost service that we could speak of. I will just pick out a few more, and hopefully, you will not find the letter to be tedious.

“By the Holy Spirit, is every soul given life, exalted by purity, and made radiant by the unity of the Trinity in a sacred and mystical manner.” Antiphon I, Fourth Tone

There are antiphons that are sung before the Gospel is read in the Matins service. Usually there are three sets. On great feasts, we only sing the first antiphon in the fourth tone. The end of that antiphon is as above. We must never forget that God will give us understanding in a mystical way. The purpose of life is to become pure and radiant and this is only possible by entering in the Trinity. We sing this antiphon so many times during the year that it gets into our bones and our heart. I hope it comforts your heart.

The following gospel excerpt is from the reading for Pentecost matins, and it also is one of the Resurrection Gospels that is read in some of the Sunday matins services throughout the year. Let’s look at the excerpt first, and I will tell you a couple “take homes”.

“The same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in their midst and said unto them, “Peace be unto you.” And when He had so said, He showed unto them His hands and His side. Then were the disciples glad when they saw the Lord. Then said Jesus to them again, “Peace be unto you. As My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you.” And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said unto them, ‘Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained.’” (Full reading: John 20:19-31)

On the Day of the resurrection, when the Lord came into the upper room, the first thing He said to his disciples was: “Peace be unto you”. This tells us the most important thing we should seek, and if we listen to the church we will learn exactly how to seek peace. The disciples were not feeling peaceful that day, and even after the Lord spoke with them they were still afraid for many days, until the Holy Spirit came.

Peace is our objective. We want peace not as the world speaks of peace, but as God speaks of peace. That peace is when the soul is quiet and holy and when there is only goodness within it and no sin. This is the peace that you must be seeking. We can find some of this peace even in this world. With will be finding peace in the midst of an un-peaceful world, with its many difficulties just as the disciples were given peace, but it did not manifest immediately.

The Lord also promised the Holy Spirit to his disciples, after breathing upon them. They did not receive the Holy Spirit right away; this would happen on Pentecost, fully 50 days later. God is not slack regarding His promises,

but He does not fulfill them in a way that we always understand. This is why patience is so important. If we are active in the Christian life and struggling, we will learn to be patient.

After the Lord said these things, He also told the apostles that they would have the power to remit sins. That is one of the charisms of the priesthood. We don't have time to talk about that in this letter, but we will talk about it another time.

I will leave you with only two more things. They are very similar, so I will put them together. Let us never forget that Jesus Christ is God and man, so that we could become perfected and become like Him. Let us never forget that the difficulties we encounter in no way will frustrate God and make it impossible for Him to save us. Let us never forget that the Holy Spirit will comfort us and help us in all things, and that we must live an active and a spiritual way.

“Having attained its purpose, the most pure word in a quiet way doth bring the heart to perfection; for having accomplished the work, Christ hath gladdened His friends by distributing the Spirit in the mighty wind and fiery tongues, as He promised.” Canon of Pentecost, Ode 1

“That He might heal the minds of sin, the All-ruling God and Word doth prepare for Himself as a spotless dwelling the apostles, in whom the light of the Spirit, One in might and essence with Him, doth now make Its abode.” Canon of Pentecost, Ode 5

May God bless you and help you in all things. Let us pray for one another that we become a little bit more patient, that our hearts become a little softer and not stony, and that the Comforter would help us in all things.

Priest Seraphim Holland, St. Nicholas Orthodox Church, McKinney Texas.

http://www.orthodox.net/catechism/feasts-of-the-lord_2019+pentecost+pastoral-letter.pdf

http://www.orthodox.net/catechism/feasts-of-the-lord_2019+pentecost+pastoral-letter.doc