

Pentecost (Lev Gillet)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



“We celebrate the feast of Pentecost and the coming of the Spirit, the appointed day of the promise, the fulfilment of hope”. With these words, at Vespers on the eve of the feast, the Church invites us to enter the atmosphere of this great feast, which coincides with the seventh Sunday after the Resurrection and which is in no way inferior to it.



At Mattins for the feast, we read the ninth Matins Gospel, which describes the appearances of the Risen Lord. In this passage (John 20: 19-31) we see a first descent of the Holy Spirit on the disciples: Jesus “breathed on them, and said to them, receive the Holy Spirit...”. This first coming of the Spirit is no less real than on the day of Pentecost. The difference is that, on the day of Pentecost, the Spirit descended on the disciples ‘with power’. There is the same difference in this between the coming of the Holy Spirit on every baptised Christian at the moment when they receive the sacrament of chrismation, and that baptism of the Spirit which we shall speak of again, and which certain Christians receive at an advanced stage of spiritual life.

At the Liturgy, on Sunday morning, instead of an epistle, the account of the events of Pentecost, as they are described in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles (2: 1-11), is read. Certain aspects of this account call specially for our attention.

“And when the day of Pentecost was fully come...”. Pentecost is both a culmination and a start. A new way was opening to the disciples, now however they had prepared themselves for it. For we cannot enter into Pentecost without preparation. We need, first of all, to have assimilated the whole spiritual substance that the fifty days following the Resurrection have offered us. We need to have experienced the risen Christ. We need to have lived through the days of the Passion. In short, one must have matured.

“They were all with one accord in one place...”. Some other verses in Acts

picture for us the eleven assembled 'in the upper room, together with Mary – mother of Jesus – and the other women. It was there that the Church was born. They all prayed together. The necessary conditions for receiving the Holy Spirit were there. And we, too, at certain moments need to withdraw from the world and to shut ourselves in the upper room of our soul. There let us pray and unite ourselves to the prayer and the faith of the whole Church. We must be 'together' with the apostles and with the Mother of God. Whoever ignores the authority of the apostles, or to do without the maternal presence of Our Lady, cannot receive the Holy Spirit.

“And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind...”. The Holy Spirit is a breath or wind. What matters for us is not to stand amazed at the power of this breath, but to submit ourselves to it and to allow the Spirit to take us where it wills, as did Jesus during his earthly life. And, also, let us not forget that this very breath is itself 'guided'. It is not an autonomous and incoherent force. Jesus breathed the Spirit on his disciples. But this breath proceeded first from the mouth of the Father. It is an obedience to God. In obeying the impulse of the Spirit (the sound of the wind is just an external and rare symbol – the inner impulse is the reality), we become part of the Spirit's own obedience, proceeding from the Father and sent by the Son.

“And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them.” The Holy Spirit appears under the guise of tongues. Pentecost heals the dispersion and confusion of languages brought about by the proud effort of the tower of Babel. It re-establishes the unity of human language. The disciples will be understood by all the foreigners then in Jerusalem – Parthians, Medes and Cappadocians – and these are all amazed to hear the words of the Galileans as though in their own languages. The language of the Spirit – at least in its inner meaning – is still accessible today to all people, to all races, to all nations. The same Spirit transmits a universal message that each soul, nevertheless, recognizes as its own. Moreover, even in our day, someone in whom the Holy Spirit is active, though he may not be able to express himself in languages that are foreign to him, becomes capable at least of finding the psychological ‘language’ which will echo in, and open the heart of, each person. Thus ‘dialogue’ becomes possible. Tongues of fire appeared on each disciple. These tongues imply a love aflame. The words seem to be conditioned by the flame. Lastly, these tongues are evenly distributed. They are not the privilege of Peter, or of Mary, or of the eleven. They alight on all those present in the upper room; yet these tongues of flame were one and the same fire. Thus the problem of unity and of the person finds itself resolved in the Church, without either the one or the other being sacrificed.

“And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit...”. When the whole heart is suddenly filled with the Holy Spirit together with a new, extraordinary power, that is the ‘baptism of the Holy Spirit’, which is different from both the baptism by water and the anointing, through which the Church confers the Spirit on the faithful. There is here a reality which we have, to a very large extent, lost sight of, but on which Scripture insists and towards which our attention needs to be redirected.

:And began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance...”. We have already mentioned the importance of this word ‘given’ when applied to the Holy Spirit. But here it raises the question, generally, of gifts. One danger would be to desire them in a disordered way. Another danger would be to neglect them, to forget about them, to think that all those things belong to the past, when in fact they have been given to the Church, or rather, they are given to the Church – for all time.

Immediately after the liturgy, the ‘kneeling vespers’, with its special structure, begins. During this service the congregation kneels and sings with all due solemnity the troparion: “Heavenly King, Comforter, Spirit of Truth, everywhere present...”. We all know that this troparion is said at the beginning of every liturgy and of the majority of services of the Byzantine rite. And it seems to be the only

prayer of this rite to be addressed directly to the Holy Spirit. On the morning of the Sunday of Pentecost, this prayer is hugely important: the moment when we sing it is the precise moment when the Church concentrates its whole aspiration towards the Spirit and entreats its coming. At this moment, each believer who is kneeling, can, if they ask the One who is the supreme gift, receive in their heart the renewal of Pentecostal grace, the descent of the Dove.

The congregation, still kneeling, listens as the priest reads seven long prayers: two of them are addressed to God – without distinction between the three Persons of the Trinity – two are addressed to the Father and three to the Son. They can at first glance seem somewhat diffuse, if, however, we analyse them attentively we can see that they comprise a summary of Orthodox doctrine. They recapitulate the whole divine economy of our salvation. Although they make certain allusions to the Holy Spirit, we can mark a shift from the mystery of the Spirit to the mystery of the Trinity. One sentence from the fifth of these prayers includes the words: “ You, who, on the last and great day of our salvation, the day of Pentecost, have revealed to us the mystery of the consubstantial and co-eternal Holy Trinity...”. This ‘trinitarian’ aspect of the feast of Pentecost explains why, amongst Orthodox peoples, this Sunday is often called the Sunday of the Holy Trinity. It also explains why the Churches of the Byzantine rite have deemed it fitting to consecrate the Monday of Pentecost more specifically to the Holy Spirit: the liturgy and the major portion of vespers – apart from the prayers – are repeated on this day.

It is true that to dedicate the Monday of Pentecost to the Holy Spirit is an anomaly, because the real feast of the Holy Spirit is the actual day of Pentecost, and it is certainly to be wished that, on this particular Sunday, believers should address their devotion very specially to the third Person of the Trinity, whose existence and action remain so veiled to many of us. On the other hand, it is also good that the mystery of the Trinity itself should be brought to our attention. To think of the dogma of the Trinity as an abstract, distant speculation, which had no connection with our practical life, would be a great mistake. The living and reciprocal love of the three divine Persons is the eternal fact, infinitely greater and more important than everything that concerns ourselves. Mankind was created because the three divine Persons wished to communicate to us some measure of their own intimate life. Here on earth, the life of grace is already the participation in this life of the Trinity. The soul which dies united to God is called to enter the circulation of love between the three Persons. Their relationship constitutes the supreme model -albeit transcending them infinitely- for the relationships that should exist between people. Pentecost, which is the final event in the history of our salvation, lead us into the heart of the mystery of the Trinity- that ocean which

is both the source and end of the divine love which carries us towards God.