

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. One God.

As you know, after we celebrate the Lord's Pascha, fifty days later we celebrate the great feast of Pentecost. Last Sunday was the celebration of the Feast of All Saint's which is always the Sunday following Pentecost. Starting the next day, on Monday, we entered into the Apostle's Fast which is also known as the Sts. Peter and Paul Fast. It is an unusual fast in the Church, in that there is not a set number of days for the length of the fast.

The fast begins on the day after the observance of All Saints' Sunday and the fast ends the day before the observance of the Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul, which falls on June 29. In earliest practice, however, the fast was probably not connected with the Feast of Peter and Paul. Rather, it was a time for fasting after the celebration of Pentecost and All Saints. Apparently, different traditions prescribed different lengths of the fast. In some places the fast was for one week, in others it was several weeks and in others only one day. Today, the fast still has a variable length because of its connection to the date of Pentecost, and therefore the Sunday of All Saints.

The date of Pentecost is based on the date of Holy Pascha. Pentecost falls fifty days after Pascha and therefore, the date of the Sunday of All Saints varies accordingly. This means that the length of the Fast of the Apostles also varies each year. For those churches which follow the New Calendar, which we are one of, the Fast can be as long as 30 days or as short as no days, depending upon when Holy Pascha falls. If we were following the Old Calendar, the fast could be as long as 42 days or as short as 8 days.

The Fast of the Holy Apostles dates back to early years of the church. The first evidence of this fast is found in the writings of St. Athanasius the Great (†373). In his letter to Emperor Constance, he writes: *"During the week following Pentecost, the people who observed the fast went out to the cemetery to pray."* Some 20 years later, St. Ambrose (†397) writes: *"On the days following his ascension into heaven, however, we again fast"* (Sermon 61).

There was a famous woman who made a pilgrimage to the Holy Lands in the fourth-century named Egeria. She mentions the Apostles' Fast in her writings which records that *"on the day following the feast of Pentecost, a period of fasting*

*began". In the same period, that is in the fourth century, the Apostolic Constitutions was written and 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 fasting after the body has been refreshed."*

Until the second half of the 3rd century, the Fast of the Holy Apostles was linked to Pentecost and lasted only for one week according to the Apostolic Constitutions. Later, after the martyrdom of the apostles Peter and Paul and following the development of the commemoration of their death which was around the year 258, the Apostles' Fast became linked to the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul on June 29. Consequently, it became a fasting period of preparation for the celebration of the feast of the great apostles.

St. Symeon of Thessalonica (†1429) explains: *"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."*

Subsequently, the duration of the Fast of the Holy Apostles changed from one week to a variable period depending on the date of the Feast of Pascha.

There are different traditions regarding how strictly to follow the Fast. In most Orthodox traditions, the fast is not as severe as that during Great Lent. Fish, wine and oil are permitted on all days except Wednesday and Friday, which are strict fast-days throughout the year except immediately following the Great Feasts of the Lord. In other traditions, fish, wine and oil are only permitted on Saturdays and Sundays during the Fast of the Apostles.

In the Antiochian tradition, which is our tradition, the fasting rules are that we eat no meat, poultry, or dairy products which includes eggs, during the time of the fast. Fish, wine and oil are allowed on all days except Wednesdays and Fridays, which continue to be strict days of fasting. We also reduce how many meals we eat each day.

Remember that your young children do not need to fast. As they get older, start to introduce fasting to your children. And, if you are elderly or in poor health you do not need to fast, although many doctors teach that the type of fasting that we do is very good for our health.

Remember that fasting is not only abstaining from meat and dairy products, fasting is also to live in austerity and renouncing the worldly pleasures. Fasting is not measured by how much hunger we endure. Even though hunger is an important factor in fasting, it is not enough by itself. In addition to physical hunger, we are called to recognize our spiritual hunger and seek to feed it with repentance, prayer and almsgiving.

The Apostles' fast has emerged since the very early days of Christianity. It is honored and preserved in the Church as a part of our Holy Tradition. Like all Fasts in the Orthodox Church, the Holy Apostles' Fast aims to help us put on the "armor of light" to protect us against the attacks of the enemy that may befall us during our spiritual journey to become united with God through His grace.

The Fast of the Apostles can be an occasion for reflection upon the lives and example of the Holy Apostles. On the Sunday of All Saints, we remembered and celebrated the lives of all those who have gone before us in the faith: our fathers, forefathers, the apostles, preachers, evangelists, teachers, hierarchs and martyrs. The readings which are appointed for that day (Hebrews 11:33-40, 12:1-2, and Matthew 10:32-33, 37-38, 19:27-30) remind us that countless worshippers of God have sacrificed their lives for the faith which we have inherited.

Following Jesus' admonition recorded by St. Matthew, the Apostles left behind their parents, their children, and their possessions in order to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to people who did not know Him. Christian missionaries around the world are still doing this today. During the Fast of the Apostles we are reminded to pray for them all, and for Orthodox missions everywhere.

The Fast is also an occasion to remember that in Christ, we have a unity that goes far beyond our personal opinions, likes or dislikes. The Acts of the Apostles tells us that the Apostles themselves recognized this very early. The occasion was an argument which took place regarding whether the Gentile followers of Christ needed to observe the Law of Moses. At first, Peter and Paul took different sides in the discussion.

Both Peter and Paul were Jews, but their personalities and backgrounds were very different. Peter, who was formerly a fisherman, was among the first of the disciples to follow Jesus. Presumably he was uneducated and probably spoke only Aramaic in the local Galilean dialect. Paul, on the other hand, was very well educated under Gamaliel, the most famous rabbi (teacher) of his time, and spoke several languages.

Moreover, Paul—who was originally named Saul—was not among the Twelve Disciples. He even led a deadly persecution of Christians until he received an astounding vision of Christ while on the way to Damascus (Acts 9). The blinding vision changed his life forever. Thereafter he became an ardent witness to the risen Christ. But because of his former life, it was very difficult at first for the disciples to forgive and to accept him.

Before very long, Peter and Paul became involved in the dispute about keeping the Law. Paul, who was preaching among Gentiles, taught that it was not necessary for the Gentiles who accepted Jesus as the Christ to keep the Law. Peter, however, was drawn towards the opinion of some Jews that although Jesus was indeed the promised Messiah, the Law nevertheless should continue to be observed for all time, even by the Gentile converts.

Paul journeyed to Jerusalem to meet with Peter and the other disciples in order to settle the matter. After some discussion, it was agreed that the Gentiles who had become Christians would not need to be circumcised and thus required to follow the Law. However, they would continue to observe some of the restrictions of the Law. They were to refrain from eating food offered to idols, from blood, from strangled things and from sexual immorality. This meeting is often referred to as the Council in Jerusalem and the result was made in conciliation, not by a dictate.

These events remind us to seek God when we have disagreements within the Church. This requires humility on our part, and the willingness to accept others even when we might not have agreed with them before. We let go of our own personal wishes or demands, and pray for the good of the Church and for a recognition of the will of God for all of us together.

At the conclusion of the Fast, therefore, we celebrate Peter and Paul together.

The icon of the Feast depicts the two men standing side-by-side, holding the Church together in their hands. This is a powerful symbol of the supernatural love for one another which is given by the Holy Spirit. In the Holy Spirit, we have agreement and new life. For this reason, Orthodox Christians today can regard the Fast of the Apostles as one of the most important times of the year, a time to humble ourselves and pray for genuine love and unity in the Church around the world.

No better words may express the importance of fasting in our life like the words of St. Abba Isaac the Syrian who says, "*... since fasting is a weapon established by God ...the human race knew no victory before fasting, and the devil was never defeated by our nature as it is: but this weapon has indeed deprived the devil of strength from the outset... As soon as the devil sees someone possessed of this weapon (that is-fasting), fear straightway falls on this adversary and tormentor of ours, who remembers and thinks of his defeat by the Savior in the wilderness; his strength is at once destroyed and the sight of the weapon given us by our Supreme Leader burns him up. A man armed with the weapon of fasting is always afire with zeal. He who remains therein, keeps his mind steadfast and ready to meet and repel all violent passions.*"