

THE CHURCH'S BIRTHDAY
Pentecost
By Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev
June 12, 2011

Moscow, Church of the Icon of the Mother of God "Joy of All Who Sorrow"

Today we celebrate the descent of the Holy Spirit on the disciples of our Savior, which occurred on the fiftieth day after the Resurrection of Christ. In a miraculous and mystical manner the apostles spoke in various languages. People, having come from various lands and nations and who spoke different languages and ordinarily would not be able to understand each other, heard the apostles speaking in their own native tongues and understood each word, which penetrated not only their minds but their hearts.

Sometimes this day is called the birthday of the Church, because with the descent of the Holy Spirit on the apostles began the victorious spreading of Christianity throughout the entire world, which continues even until today. We think about the fact that when the Lord Jesus Christ left this earthly life, here, on the earth, there remained only a small handful of His disciples, and the amount of those who believed in Him were numbered in the tens, hundreds or perhaps a few thousand people, but not more than that. Then Christianity began to spread throughout the entire world, and today there are more than two billion Christians. And how many more Christians there were who have lived their lives and passed on into the next world during the course of the two thousand year history of the Church!

In what way did the Word of God reach the ears and hearts of people? Why did so many people believe in the Resurrection of Christ? Why do so many people strive to follow Christ and to keep His commandments? Why have so many people been attracted to the Evangelical way of life, despite its difficulty? Because for centuries the Holy Spirit has been inspiring the Church, her sons and daughters, and today continues to operate in the Church the same way that He operated in the lives of the first Christians. The same way that the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples and they were able to speak in various languages and were understood by those who heard them, today, as well, the Divine Spirit touches the hearts and tongues of preachers, so that they may overcome their human weakness, their feebleness, their lack of wisdom, and would be able to speak the words of God so that the hearts of people would respond to these words.

The Holy Spirit never dissipates and will never run dry in the Church. Incorrect are those who think that only in the early years of the Church the Holy Spirit was poured out abundantly, and think that today His grace is dried up and is only poured out in small portions to certain people. The grace of the Holy Spirit is accessible to all of us and is poured out on each of us. When we turn to God during the Divine Liturgy with the words: "O Lord, who didst send down Thy Most Holy Spirit upon Thine apostles at the third hour: Take Him not from us, O Good One, but renew Him in us who pray to Thee", — we know that at that moment the Lord in actual fact is sending the Holy Spirit to us. He renews our human nature, and when we pray: "Send down Thy Holy Spirit upon us and upon these Gifts here offered", we know that the Holy Spirit descends upon the Holy Gifts (on the bread and wine which are on the altar table), and descends upon us as well. Bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ, and we sinful earthy people become new people, renewed in the image and likeness of God. Through receiving Holy Communion, when the Lord touches our hearts, when He enters our body, our blood, our thoughts, our feelings, and unites with our entire being, our mystical union with God takes place, and we are mystically filled with the Holy Spirit.

On the day of Pentecost we say the prayer which we did not read during the Paschal period, but which we will now say during the entire year: "O Heavenly King, the Comforter, the Spirit of truth, Who art everywhere and fillest all things, Treasury of Blessings, and Giver of life: Come and abide in us, and cleanse us from every impurity, and save our souls, O Good One." The Holy Spirit "is everywhere present and fillest all things," i.e., He is present everywhere and in all places, regardless of whether or not we call on Him, irregardless of whether or not we ask

that He comes to us. The Holy Spirit always and everywhere abides in this world; He acts in nature when every spring seemingly dead trees begin to bloom, when the fragrance spreads over the whole earth, and when the Lord, as in previous years, sends His mercy and grace to our sinful earth, renewing her and giving her new life. She is filled with the Divine Spirit so that every year the grass, flora, plants and wonderful fragrant flowers may grow and bloom again.

What is needed in order for the Holy Spirit to come and abide in us? You see, He is right near us and with us all the time. All that is needed is for us to open our hearts to Him in order to meet Him, that our hearts would not be hardened; that we would live our lives in congruence with the Evangelical ideal, with which we have been sealed by Christ, that we would always be ready for the Holy Spirit to come and abide in us. If it seems that the Holy Spirit is not near us, if we should fall into misfortune, as often happens, times of despondency, laziness, weakness or despair, — let us not throw up our arms and be despondent. We must understand that the reason for this does not lie with God: God never leaves us and goes far away from us, the Holy Spirit never abandons us and leaves us. He is always here, near us and with us. The reason for this can only lie with us: either because of our sinfulness or human weakness.

Let us not allow our human passions, weaknesses or callousness create an impediment for the Holy Spirit, Who desires to come and abide in us, and Who wants each of us to transform ourselves from fishermen into apostles, and change from weak human beings into people who in word and deed, and by how we live our lives, proclaim the perfection of God.

Translated from the Russian by Archpriest Peter Olsen