

## Pentecost 2009

“True ascetics manifest the fruit of the Spirit”

On the first Sunday after Pentecost, having just celebrated the descent of the Holy Spirit and the beginning of the Apostolic Church, Orthodox Christians now celebrate the feast of All Saints. On this day, we remember all the saints throughout the world and throughout time. In the hymnography for this feast, we sing:

As a duty let us crown with songs of praise the Forerunner, with the Apostles, Prophets, Martyrs, Bishops, righteous ones, ascetics, martyred Priests, and God-loving women, with all the God-fearing, and the myriad of angels, beseeching, through their petitions, that we may attain by their glory, glory from the presence of Christ the Savior.

This feastday is important because it is a testimony to the life of the Holy Spirit in the universal Church - in the Body of Christ – after all, we Orthodox are the original Pentecostal Christians! Each and every one of us, when we are baptized and chrismated, receive the gift of the Holy Spirit in our own personal Pentecost. We are then justified by our faith to begin a journey of inner transformation as we work to have the Holy Spirit become more and more active in our lives as Christians. It is because of this presence of the Holy Spirit in us that we are all called saints. St. Paul testifies to this in his epistles addressed the faithful in his Churches. Our hymnography bears witness to the fact that each and every one of us, by the power of the Holy Spirit, has the potential to become numbered among the Saints who we liturgically commemorate in our annual calendar.

One of the classes of saints that we remember this day is the ascetics. An ascetic is one who practices ascesis. The words "ascetic" and "ascesis" both come from the Greek root *ἀσκητικός*, which are derived from the verb *ἀσκέω*, meaning "I train." In other words, ascesis is spiritual exercise! For this reason, the Apostle Paul likens the Christian life to training for various sporting events (1 Cor. 9:24-27; 2 Tim. 4:7-8). As such, the methods of ascesis should not be used as ends in themselves, but as a means to an end, to achieve the "prize" that, according to the Apostle Paul, is the fruit of the Holy Spirit and also salvation itself.

Asceticism is most often associated exclusively with monasticism. However, all faithful Christians are exhorted to practice lesser forms of ascesis through the Church's

regimen of prayer, fasting, and repentance. We are all expected to do this! Without asceticism, we sell ourselves back to sin and become slaves to the corruption of our fleshly passions. Such a person has been well characterized in the second epistle of Saint Peter:

... those who indulge in the lust of defiling passion and despise authority. Bold and willful (...) like irrational animals, creatures of instinct, born to be caught and killed, reviling in matters of which they are ignorant.... They are blots and blemishes, reveling in their dissipation.... They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. (...) They have hearts trained in greed. (...) Forsaking the right way, they have gone astray.... These are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm.... For, uttering loud boasts of folly, they entice with licentious passions of the flesh men who have barely escaped from those who live in error. They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption; for whatever overcomes a man, to that he is enslaved (2 Peter 10-19).

Because of our fallen nature, we are prone to the sinful, negative, and enslaving aspects of the passions. Asceticism prevents this from happening, but only with God's grace.

My point is that the function of asceticism is to open oneself up to the grace and operation of the Holy Spirit. Simple things like prayer, fasting, the sacramental and liturgical life of the Church, almsgiving, etc. are means by which we, as regular people, can be ascetics. Now, how do we know that our asceticism is working? According to St. Paul, we should be bearing the fruit of the Spirit:

I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit (Galatians 5:16-25).

What great qualities we Christians are to have – joy, peace, kindness, love, etc! I bring this up because there are so many spiritually unhappy, morose, and glum people in the Church.

In fact, the more “spiritual” some people think of themselves, the more unhappy, morose, and glum they tend to be. Why is this so?

According to the above passage from Galatians, St. Paul teaches us that there are two spiritual personality types: Type A - hateful, contentious, jealous, wrathful, full of selfish ambitions, creators of dissensions, envious, murderous with their tongues, and drunk on themselves, and Type B: loving, joyful, peace-filled, longsuffering, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled.

Orthodox Christians should be the type B personality since that demonstrates the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our life. The starting point for all this joy and happiness is the fact that death and sin have been conquered by Jesus Christ. He has been raised from the dead, He has ascended to heaven, He has sent forth the Holy Spirit upon his apostles and disciples and He has established a Church by which we can become co-heirs with Christ and the adopted children of God full of the fruit of the Holy Spirit. This is good news...it is THE good news! All that we have to do is open our hearts and souls and minds just a little bit and let the light of the Holy Spirit be poured into our very being.

However, if we are a type A personality in the Church, then there is something fundamentally wrong: 1) either we don't practice asceticism even in its most basic forms like prayer and fasting and almsgiving, or 2) we are doing asceticism incorrectly or for the wrong reasons, such as personal vainglory. In either situation, such a person is not turning out the way God intends them to be. The wrong type of asceticism, for the wrong reasons, and the Lord can put into us, as Micaiah warned Ahab in I Kings 22:19-23, a “lying spirit.” In our hearts, that lying spirit tortures us and fills us with delusions in both our personal spiritual life and our corporate spiritual life in the Church. Only by right asceticism, for each and every one of us, can we be like Sampson and be filled with the Holy Spirit and tear apart the spiritual lions and beasts that attack us (Judges 14:5) so that we can become a type B personality. The Lord can make us mighty and strong saints if we let Him.

As we pass through this bright and holy season of Pentecost, let each and every one of us take a good look at our spiritual personality. Are we practicing the basics of Orthodox asceticism? Are we manifesting the fruit of the Holy Spirit? If we answer “yes,” then let us joyfully reply, “Hallelujah!” We are on the right path; the one that leads to the Kingdom. Keep on walking in the Spirit. If any of us answered “no,” then there is something

fundamentally wrong with our spiritual life. We must repent, seek the proper path, and ask the Lord to create in us a clean heart and renew a right Spirit within us. May the Lord Jesus Christ teach each and every one of us true asceticism, the Orthodox Christian way of life, so that we may be overflowing vessels of the Holy Spirit and the faithful, loving, joy-filled beings that God created us to be. Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!