

November 30, 2014  
The Apostle Andrew

### Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings Two Meanings of Pentecost

In Luke's theology the mission of the Holy Spirit is especially related to the event of Pentecost. Consequently, the forgiveness and remission of sins—the Holy Spirit's first gift—forms a theme foundational to the imagery of Pentecost. This is the case, whether "Pentecost" refers to the whole Paschal season (which is its older meaning) or refers to the specific day of the Holy Spirit's descent. We may consider these two senses in order:

First, in its original meaning, Pentecost—Greek for "fifty"—designates the seven weeks (plus one day) that begin with the day of Pascha. Pentecost forms, thus, a week-of-weeks. This is how the word was commonly understood by the earlier Fathers: Tertullian, Origen, Athanasius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Basil, Epiphanius of Salamis, Gregory the Theologian, and Cyril of Alexandria.

This more ancient and etymological sense of the word is still preserved in our standard Orthodox *Pentecostarion*, the volume containing the texts for the moveable portions of the liturgical services during the season from Pascha through the week after Pentecost Sunday.

Understood in this way, the word "Pentecost" is synonymous with "Pascha," because the Fathers thought of the latter as a large festival lasting fifty days. This is how Saint Athanasius of Alexandria understood Pascha in his *Paschal Letters*: "The holy Sunday extends, by continuous grace, through all the seven weeks of Pentecost, during which we celebrate the feast of Pascha." That is to say, Athanasius goes on, Pentecost includes the day of Pascha plus seven more weeks.

In the Scriptures, the number 50 (Greek *pentecosta*) is particularly associated with deliverance and the remission of debt, an association most obvious in the custom of the Jubilee, the fiftieth year. The Alexandrian Fathers, especially, when they thought about the fifty days of the Paschal feast, were reminded of the fifty cubits across the span, or breadth, of Noah's Ark—and they commented accordingly. Thus, Clement

of Alexandria observed, “Now there are some who say that . . . fifty [symbolizes] hope and the remission granted by the Pentecost.”

Clement’s disciple, Origen, followed suit:

To the width we ascribe the number fifty, which is the number consecrated to forgiveness and remission. According to the Law, in fact, there was an occasion for forgiveness and remission of debts every fifty years. . . . Now Christ, the mystical Noah, in his Ark—that is to say, the Church—in which he saves the human race from destruction, has ascribed this number of forgiveness to the span. For, if he had not granted to sinners the remission of sins, the Church would not have spanned the world.

These fifty cubits across Noah’s Ark become, for Origen, the fifty days of the Pascha:

The number fifty contains the mystery of forgiveness and pardon, as we have copiously demonstrated in many passages of the Scriptures. The fiftieth day after Pascha is considered a feast day in the Law. In the Gospel, too, teaching the parable about forgiveness and pardon, the Lord tells of a debtor who owed fifty denarii.

In the following century Athanasius continued this Alexandrian theme:

Counting all the seven weeks [from Pascha] one by one, let us keep feast on the holy day of Pentecost—which at one time pertained to the Jews, by way of type, the feast of weeks, in which they granted forgiveness and remission of debts. Indeed that day was one of deliverance in every respect.

Second, later in the fourth century, the word “Pentecost” began to appear more frequently (in Gregory the Theologian and John Chrysostom, for instance) with specific reference to the “fiftieth” day of the season, the day celebrating the Holy Spirit’s descent upon the Church. References to Pentecost in this sense were more likely to *distinguish* it from Pascha.

The same emphasis on the forgiveness of sins, nonetheless, pertained to Pentecost in this second sense, as well, because this was the very day when Peter exhorted his listeners, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).

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