



## PENTECOST: 'the day of the Holy Trinity'

*Oh you who are beyond everything! For what else can be sung about you?  
St Gregory the Theologian*

*We have seen the true light, we have received the heavenly Spirit,  
we have found the true faith worshipping the undivided Trinity  
which has saved us.*

Hymn from the feast day of Pentecost

*By Philip Kariatlis*

**F**ifty days after Pascha, the Church celebrates the feast day of Pentecost (in Greek Πεντηκοστή literally meaning the 'fiftieth day'), which commemorates the day on which the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples (cf. Acts 2), as Christ had promised during his earthly life (cf. Jn 14:26; 15:26), clothing them with an indestructible power from on high (cf. Lk 24:49). Far from being left orphaned by the ascension of Jesus, the book of Acts reveals the 'Spirit of the Lord' coming down upon the apostles as a mighty wind (cf. Acts 2:2), animating and resting upon them as tongues of fire (cf. Acts 2:3). In this way, the disciples were now filled with the inspirational power of God's Spirit, and enabled to speak in other tongues (cf. Acts 2:1-4) as they set upon their mission to bear witness to the glory of the Son of God into the ends of the earth. The immense importance of this day lies precisely in the fact that it marked the fulfilment of the Lord's promise of salvation, already foretold by the prophet Joel, at least five hundred years before the birth of Christ<sup>1</sup>: "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh... then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." (Acts 2:20-21; cf. Joel 2:28-32). And so, with Pentecost came the final seal of Christ's victory and his presence amongst his people (cf. Jn 14:18; Mt 28:20) through the Spirit of God, which had as its goal, to impart to them the salvation of God's glorious kingdom.

Pentecost also celebrates the permanent outpouring and indwelling of God's Holy Spirit upon the Church resulting in its 'consecration' and 'mobilisation'. By these two expressions, namely, 'consecration' and 'mobilisation' is simply meant the showering of divine and inexhaustible grace, by the 'Spirit of truth', upon the Church, which equipped it to spread the gospel

message and to fulfil its mission of reconciliation initiated by Christ whilst on earth. Far from being a mere humanly founded socio-religious institution, the Church, from the very beginning, was sealed by the presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit, leading the faithful to the Father. In this way, a radically new phase had been introduced also within the life of the Church - namely, the Holy Spirit's enduring connection with the ecclesial gathering which resulted in an overwhelming and enduring fellowship [κοινωνία] between God, the members of the Church and the entire created realm.<sup>2</sup> And so, intimately united with God, and therefore sharing all the divine qualities and powers, the Church was now set into motion to preach the good news and to commence its mission to incorporate the entire created world into a most intimate communion of eternal life and love with God, making it, in this way, an inheritor of eternal blessedness.

Specifically regarding the 'great mystery' (cf. Eph 5:32) of unity between God and the Church - namely the gift of *koinonia* - it would be no exaggeration to state that all images of the Church found in the Scriptures depict precisely not only God's intimate presence amongst his people, but also his intense desire to share his entire divine way of life with the world at large. That all Scriptural images of the Church highlight God's intimate presence and communion with the Church can be seen from the following selection of representative verses: in the Pauline epistles, for example, the Church is portrayed as the divine-human body of Christ with Christ as its head (cf. Eph 1:21-23). Indeed, in these verses, the body - being the Church - is described as the complement of the head, without which the head - being Christ - would remain incomplete. Another favourite image of the Church is that of 'the bride' of Christ (cf. Eph 5: 25-28; Rev 21:9) and the Church as "the dwelling place for the Lord" (Eph 2:22), which highlight the responsibility of the



1. There is much debate today amongst Old Testament scholarship regarding the date of Joel with three main schools: (i) The first dates the prophet Joel 835-796BC during the time when Joash was too young to govern and Jehoiada did so in his place (2 Kings 11; 2 Chron. 23-24); (ii) the second about 775-725BC and therefore as a contemporary with Hosea and Amos and (iii) about 500BC roughly contemporary with Zechariah. A fourth school shows the book of Joel to be written about 639-608BC during Josiah's reign.

2. Regarding the inextricable link between the Spirit and the Church, St Irenaeus of Lyons (130-202AD) had said: "Where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God, and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church and every grace; and the Spirit of truth." *Against the Heresies*, 3.24.1.

faithful to remain the true bride of Christ, that is, devoted to God and committed to remaining "without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind... holy and without blemish" (Eph 5:27) in order to attain perfect union with the bridegroom, Christ. The faithful within the Church are described as 'the temple of the living God' (2Cor 6:16) underscoring the Spirit's indwelling presence within every faithful member of the *ekklesia*. Simply, as by way of example from the Old Testament, the verse found in 1 Kings 9:3 beautifully captures the communal nature of the *ekklesia*: "I have consecrated this house that you have built, and put my name there forever; my eyes and my heart will be there for all time". Clearly, therefore, even a cursory study of the Old and New Testament images of the Church would show that the essence of the *ekklesia* is precisely an assembly gathered by God; therefore one able to enjoy the presence of God and his communal way of life, in which all things are shared and held in common.

More particularly, the gift of *koinonia*, permanently bestowed upon the Church on the day of Pentecost, was that specific gift of intimate unity and fellowship with the Father, mediated through Christ and actualised by the presence of the Holy Spirit. And so, it was now possible for the faithful within the Church to experience the invigorating life of the Holy Trinity, in this way leading them into the whole truth (Jn 16:13). As members of the Church, the faithful, in the Spirit, now had access to the Father through the Son. Indeed, the coming of the Holy Spirit became the fulfilment of the world's hope for eternal beatitude and everlasting joy since its separation from God had now been overcome and healed. Consequently, since the day of Pentecost opened up the Church into the communal life of the Holy Trinity, it subsequently came to be called 'the day of the Holy Trinity' in the Church's liturgical tradition<sup>3</sup>. It is for this reason that the day is celebrated as a full revelation of the divine Trinity insofar as it marked the final and ultimate act of God's self-revelation to the world, making the Church the dwelling place *par excellence* of the Holy Trinity for the edification and salvation of the world and the glory of God's name. And so, as the 'day of the Holy Trinity' it seems fitting, in this issue of the *Voice of Orthodoxy*, to begin to focus our attention upon articulating, as far as is humanly possible, a theology of the mystery of the Holy Trinity. Such a reflection on this 'doctrine of all doctrines' will be continued in the next issues.

### **The Mystery of the Holy Trinity**

In an attempt to formulate the Church's teaching on the Holy Trinity, it has to be remembered that God, as Trinity is a mystery – indeed, the absolute mystery *par excellence*

<sup>3</sup> For example, the Doxastikon of the Sunday of Pentecost Vespers clearly brings to light this Trinitarian aspect of the feast day: "Come all you people, let us worship the Godhead of three hypostases: the Son in the Father, with the Holy Spirit; for the Father timelessly begat the Son, who is co-eternal and of one throne; and the Holy Spirit was in the Father, glorified with the Son; one might, one essence, one Godhead, which we all worship saying: Holy God who created all things through the Son, with the cooperation of the Holy Spirit; holy Mighty, through whom we have known the Father, and through whom the Holy Spirit came into the world; holy Immortal, the comforting Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and rests in the Son. O holy Trinity, glory be to you." This hymn is attributed to Emperor Leo VI (886-912AD).

since God will forever remain so – and is therefore to be 'approached' in humility, reverence and thanksgiving rather than exhaustively 'understood'. That is to say, God, in his very nature, is ineffable and inexpressible and could therefore not be known unless He himself had first willed to be revealed to the world in this way. Indeed, the mystery of the Holy Trinity exceeds the finite and created conscience of human persons and transcends their conceptual powers and knowledge. Reflecting specifically on the mystery of the Holy Trinity in the fourth century, St Gregory [Nazianzus] the Theologian (330-389/90AD) wrote: "to speak of God is impossible and to know him even more impossible."<sup>4</sup> Many centuries later, St Gregory Palamas (1296-1359AD) reminded his readers that "the super essential nature of God is not a subject to speak of or think or even contemplate, for it is far removed from all that exists and more than unknowable, incomprehensible forever."<sup>5</sup> Clearly, the essence of God's divinity will never be known to humankind, because to be so would be a contradiction in terms. If God could be fully understood by the creaturely mind and described by creaturely concepts, He would cease to be God.

However, God who is hidden (*Deus absconditus*) has also revealed himself (*Deus revelatus*) through his ordinary and extraordinary revelation; his ultimate self-disclosure was beheld in the incarnation of the Son of God which gave the world the opportunity to hear God, to see and even touch him (cf. 1Jn 1:1). St Basil the Great (330-379AD) wrote that God disclosed himself to humanity to the extent that humanity was capable of receiving this revelation:

we know the greatness of God, His power, his wisdom, his goodness, his providence over us and the justness of his judgments; but not his essence... We know our God from his operations, but do not undertake to approach near his essence. His operations come down to us, but his essence remains beyond our reach.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore God is, at the same time totally inaccessible and really communicable to the created world. God is unknowable and ineffable but at the same time we know that He is because He has revealed Himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is Trinity; a *personal* God "and this fact can be deduced from no principle nor explained by any sufficient reason for there are neither principles nor causes anterior to the Trinity."<sup>7</sup> And so, as a wondrous revelation of divine life and love eternal, human persons can, therefore, enjoy his beatitude and, together with St Gregory the Theologian affirm in praise and thanksgiving, and with a sense of wonder and awe the God who is 'One-in-Three and Three-in-One' [Μονάς ἐν Τριάδι καί Τριάς ἐν Μονάδι] this doxological proclamation, surpassing all forms of human expression: "Oh you who are beyond everything! For what else can be sung about you? [Ὡ πάντων ἐπέκεινα, τί γάρ θέμεις ἄλλο σοι μέλπειν...]."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> St Gregory of Nazianzus, *The Second Theological Oration - On God* (Discourse 28.-)

<sup>5</sup> P.G. 150, 937A.

<sup>6</sup> Letter 234, 1.

<sup>7</sup> V. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 47.

<sup>8</sup> *Dogmatic Poetry* I, 1, 29. P.G. 37, 507-8.