

The Fast of the Holy Apostles

According to the ancient tradition of the Byzantine and Orthodox Churches there is a period of fasting before the celebration of the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul. This fast begins on the Monday after the Sunday of All Saints and continues until the feast itself. Since the celebration of All Saints depends on when Easter is observed, the fast for Sts. Peter and Paul varies from a couple of weeks to a month or more. For example, this year the fast starts on June 12th and is kept until the 29th, about three weeks.

Most people do not follow this fast since it is not obligatory now, but this does not mean that it is not observed. We may ask why should we fast especially now at the beginning of summer and school vacation time. Let us say, first, that this is not an easy time to fast; but we should remember that fasting is never easy. The very purpose of fasting is to discipline ourselves and this requires hard work and sacrifices.

The discipline of fasting leads us to be open to God's Spirit and His Word. We look for consolation to today's problems and difficulties and we seek answers in many places. The only true and lasting place to find meaning to the crises that face us is to return to God; but it is only in silent waiting for God to speak to us through His Spirit that we can find this consolation.

The fasting and discipline asked of us by the Church during this period of preparation for the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul can be a better teacher. We can learn how to free ourselves from the sway of convenience by fasting at the beginning of summer. The free avoidance of foods (meat products is the minimal fast) on Wednesdays and Fridays along with prayer can give us the strength and insights to see what things are really needful for our lives. The wisdom of this world can be met with a spiritual wisdom that can build our character and our relationship with God.

Petrovka – Saints Peter and Paul Fast:

Who ever prays and fasts has two wings lighter than the wind itself.

- *St. John Chrysostom*

The holy Apostles prepared themselves for the coming of the Holy Spirit with prayer and fasting. They prayed and fasted much before they went out to preach the Gospel. After prayer and fasting they ordained new presbyters for apostolic work, as we read in the Acts of the Apostles. "And when they had

ordained to them priests in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, in whom they believed" (Acts 14,22). St. John Chrysostom said that "the Apostles almost always fasted." (Sermon, 57 on St. Matthew)

So also holy Church from earliest times has prepared her faithful with prayer and fasting for the great feast of the Major Apostles, Sts. Peter and Paul whose memory we celebrate on June 29, along with the Synaxis of the Twelve Apostles the following day. Because this fast occurs after the holy season of Pentecost, in ancient times it was sometimes called the fast of the Pentecost.

The fast of the holy Apostles is very ancient, dating back to the first centuries of Christianity. We have the testimony of St. Athanasius the Great, St. Ambrose of Milan, St. Leo the Great and Theodoret of Cyrillus regarding it. The oldest testimony regarding the Apostles' Fast is given to us by St. Athanasius the Great (+373). In his letter to Emperor Constance, in speaking of the persecution by the Arians, he writes: "During the week following Pentecost, the people who observed the fast went out to the cemetery to pray." "The Lord so ordained it," says St. Ambrose (+397), "that as we have participated in his sufferings during the Forty Days, so we should also rejoice in his Resurrection during the season of Pentecost. We do not fast during the season of Pentecost, since our Lord Himself was present amongst us during those days ... Christ's presence was like nourishing food for the Christians. So too, during Pentecost, we feed on the Lord who is present among us. On the days following his ascension into heaven, however, we again fast." (Sermon 61)

St. Leo the Great (+461) says: "After the long feast of Pentecost, fasting is especially necessary to purify our thoughts and render us worthy to receive the Gifts of the Holy Spirit ... Therefore, the salutary custom was established of fasting after the joyful days during which we celebrated the resurrection and ascension of our Lord, and the coming of the Holy Spirit."

The pilgrim nun Silvia Egeria in her Diary (fourth century) records that on the day following the feast of Pentecost, a period of fasting began. The Apostolic Constitutions, a work of the fourth century, 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 lasting after the body has been refreshed." From the testimonies of the fourth century we ascertain that in Alexandria, Jerusalem and Antioch the Fast, of the holy Apostles was connected with Pentecost and not with the feast of the Apostles SS. Peter and Paul. In

the first centuries, after Pentecost there was one week of rejoicing, that is Privileged Days, followed by one week of fasting.

APOSTLES' FAST

On the Monday after All Saints Sunday the Byzantine Greek Catholic Church, having rejoiced for fifty days following our Lord's Pascha, starts the Fast of the Apostles.

This is the fast that Christ's disciples undertook after the Descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. As part of their preparation, the Holy Apostles began a fast asking God to strengthen their resolve and to be with them in their missionary undertakings.

It is this fast that we take part in while observing the Apostles' Fast. We do this not only because we honor the Apostles and their sacrifice, but also as a preparation to be sent as missionaries into the world, to reflect and radiate Christ to those around us.

Speaking about the Holy Apostles and the “perfect knowledge” given to them by the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, St. Irenaeus wrote:

The Lord of all gave to His apostles the power of the gospel, and by them we also have learned the truth, that is, the teaching of the Son of God - as the Lord said to them, ‘He who hears you hears Me, and he who despises you despises Me, and Him Who sent Me’ [Lk.10:16]. For we learned the plan of our salvation from no other than from those through whom the gospel came to us.

The first preached it abroad, and then later by the will of God handed it down to us in Scriptures, to be the foundation and pillar of our faith. For it is not right to say that they preached before they had come to perfect knowledge, as some dare to say, boasting that they are the correctors of the apostles. For after our Lord had risen from the dead, and they were clothed with the power from on high when the Holy Spirit came upon them, they were filled with all things and had perfect knowledge. They went out to the ends of the earth, preaching the good things that come to us from God, and proclaiming peace from heaven to all men, all and each of them equally being in possession of the gospel of God. *Against the Heresies, III*

Lest we should start thinking we are sacrificing too much of our comfort by observing yet another fast, that of the Apostles, St. Nilus the Ascetic reminds us of the devotion Christ's Holy Disciples have shown:

The Apostles received this way of life from Christ and made it their own, renouncing the world in response to His call, disregarding fatherland, relatives and possessions. At once they adopted a harsh and strenuous way of life, facing every kind of adversity, afflicted, tormented, harassed, naked, lacking even necessities; and finally they met death boldly, imitating their Teacher faithfully in all things. Thus through their actions they left behind a true image of the highest way of life. *Ascetic Discourse, Philokalia, Vol. I*

Even though the Apostles' Fast is less strict than the other fasts in the year, it is still an important observance by the faithful. For as St. Ambrose of Optina warns:

People have to answer greatly for not keeping the rules of the Church with respect to the fasts. People justify themselves by saying that they never considered it a sin to eat dairy products during the fasts. They repent and consider themselves sinners in every other respect, but they do not think to repent about not keeping the fasts. Meanwhile, they are transgressing the commandment of our holy Mother, the Church, and according to the teaching of the Apostle Paul, they are as the heathen and publicans because of their disobedience.

At the same time, Holy Church Fathers are warning against superficial fasting, the one that is concerned only with abstinence from certain types of food, while forgetting the more important, interior fast:

Fasting is acceptable to God when abstention from food is accompanied by refraining from sins, from envy, from hatred, from calumny, from vainglory, from wordiness, from other evils. He who is fasting the true fast 'that is agreeable' to God ought to shun all these things with all his strength and zeal, and remain impregnable and unshakable against all the attacks of the Evil one that are planned from that quarter. On the other hand, he who practices abstention from food, but does not keep self-control in the face of the aforesaid passions, is like unto one who lays down splendid foundations for a house, yet takes serpents and scorpions and vipers as fellow-dwellers therein. *St. Photios the Great*

In his *Homilies on the Holy Spirit*, St. Basil the Great provides even more thorough guidance:

Beware of limiting the good of fasting to mere abstinence from meats. Real fasting is alienation from evil. 'Loose the bands of wickedness.' Forgive your neighbor the mischief he has done you. Forgive him his trespasses against you. Do not 'fast for strife and debate.' You do not devour

flesh, but you devour your brother. You abstain from wine, but you indulge in outrages. You wait for evening before you take food, but you spend the day in the law courts. Woe to those who are 'drunken, but not with wine.' Anger is the intoxication of the soul, and makes it out of its wits like wine.

May we all enjoy the soul-renewing and spiritually rewarding fast.