

THE ICON OF PENTECOST

The Pentecostarion, which comprises the fifty days between Pascha and Pentecost, is the most beautiful period in the life of the Church. Just as Great Lent and Holy Week prepared us for the Resurrection, so too the Pentecostarion prepares us to receive the Holy Spirit.



Pentecost by Theophanes the Cretan, 1546. Tempera on board, 57x39 cm. Monastery of Stavronikita, Mt. Athos.

body. The disciples had previously been in communion with Christ, but now, through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, they become members of His body and temples of the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 12:27; 1 Cor 6:19).

Consistent with the witness of Scripture (Acts 1:14), many of the earliest surviving images of Pentecost include the Mother of God. In these images, she appears in the midst of the twelve disciples, all of whom are standing on level ground with tongues of fire resting above their heads. After the defeat of Iconoclasm in 843, a new image was developed in which the disciples—without the Mother of God—are shown seated on a semi-circular bench (known as a *synthronon*), found in the apse of the sanctuary and reserved for the higher clergy. If the earlier iconography was a simple illustration of the biblical event, the new image was a symbolic depiction of the Church embodied in its hierarchy gathered together in a council. The image shown here (above), which is based on a much older Byzantine prototype, represents the classic form that the iconography of Pentecost was given after the end of Iconoclasm.

Here we see twelve figures seated in two groups of six, arranged in strict hierarchical order, beginning with the two chiefs of the Apostles: Peter, on our left, and Paul, on our right. Those next to them holding Gospel books are the Evangelists Matthew and Luke (to the left), and John and Mark (to the right). Paul, Luke, and Mark were not among the original twelve disciples (cf. Acts 1:13), but the iconographer has placed them here in keeping with the icon’s aim, which is not to depict a historical event, but to present us with a symbolic image of the Church, and of the Spirit’s abiding presence in the Church through the Apostles and their canonically ordained successors.

At the feast of the Ascension we sang: “The Lord ascended into the heavens so that He might send forth the Holy Spirit into the world.” The divine economy of salvation, which began with the Annunciation, now reaches its conclusion. At His conception, the Word of God clothed Himself in our human nature, and now, at Pentecost, human beings are “clothed with the Spirit” (cf. Luke 24:29), who makes them members of Christ’s body, for “John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:5), and “all who have been baptized into Christ, have been clothed with Christ” (Gal 3:27). In this way, the gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost constitutes the birth of the Church, which is Christ’s

At the center of the *synthronon*, between Peter and Paul, a space has been reserved, framed by an open door or window rising up behind it. This space is for Christ the High Priest (Hebr 4:14), who has ascended into the heavens but who continues to be invisibly present as the head of the Church.

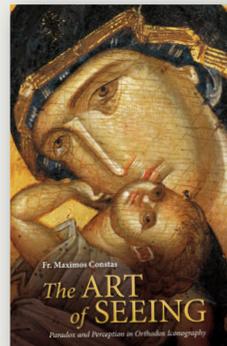
From a dome-like hemisphere descend twelve tongues of fire in gently curving trajectories. These can be understood as descending toward the heads of the Apostles (which in this icon, unusually, lack halos), or perhaps as resting there (in place of halos) and pointing toward their divine source. St John Chrysostom associates these fiery “tongues” with the Word of God, because the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, the incarnate Word. The work of the Spirit is not different from the work of Christ, but continues His work and actualizes His presence, just as warm breath (*pneuma*) is the condition for the possibility of speech (*logos*). The form of the tongue, Chrysostom says, also indicates that the Apostles are called to teach, and “the teacher of truth needs a tongue of fire filled with grace.”

Standing in the space that opens up before the apostolic throne is an old man dressed in royal clothing, often identified by an inscription as a personification of “the World.” He appears projected against (or emerging from) a dark void. His age indicates that the world is subject to corruption, that it has “grown old like a garment” (Hebr 1:11), and is “sitting in the shadow and darkness of death” (Luke 1:79). Yet he holds a cloth containing twelve scrolls symbolizing the universal preaching of the Apostles, some of whom appear to be speaking to him and blessing him. Neither the Church nor the world can live without the Holy Spirit. We who are members of the Church need the Church’s unceasing invocation of the Holy Spirit, for wherever the Holy Spirit is, there is the Church, and wherever the Church is, there is the Holy Spirit.

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