

PENTECOST:

The Descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Day

THE PROMISE OF THE FATHER

Father Matta El-Meskeen

Fulfillment of Redemption

We have already dealt with the Lord's ascension forty days after his resurrection, and how he completed the redemption which he began on the cross. For as He ascended on that day and crossed the barrier which separated us from the Father, entering into the inner shrine behind the curtain as a forerunner on our behalf, He entered with his blood on his hand and appeared before the Father - slain in the flesh because of his love and obedience, the wrath of God on man's transgression was checked forever, for the Son himself became an offering of atonement for the imperfection of humanity. Hence the saying that "Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf...thus securing an eternal redemption."

Therefore, through his ascension and his sitting at the right hand of the Father Christ fulfilled the dispensation which came down from heaven, completing redemption and securing salvation for all who believe in him.

What remains after redemption and salvation is our entry into fellowship with the Father that we may live with him in love as children. For it is one thing to die with Christ, to rise with him and to sit with him in heaven, and another to live with the Father in the fellowship of the children's love. Such was the dispensation fulfilled by the Holy Ghost and formerly described as the "Promise of the Father," for which the date was fixed in the history of mankind. It was predicted by the prophets, mentioned by Christ and realized on Pentecost.

We know that Christ realized the dispensation through the flesh - namely by death, resurrection, ascension and sitting at the right hand of the Father. But on Pentecost day the Father realized the dispensation through the Holy Ghost. For whereas the aim of Christ is salvation by the remission of sin and its penalty, and the restoration of man's relationship to God on the basis of perpetual reconciliation, that of the Father is that we should live with him in the children's love, which is the work following redemption, salvation and reconciliation.

Where the Son's role of salvation and reconciliation ended, the Father's role of love and adoption began. Of this the Lord expressly says: "In that day you will ask in my name; and I do not say to you that I shall pray the Father for you; for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from the Father" (Jn 16:26, 27).

Christ's utterance "the Father himself loves you" "In that day" was definitely fulfilled on Pentecost day when the Father sent down the Holy Ghost, his own Spirit, the Spirit of the Fatherly love described as the 'Promise of the Father.' St. Paul explains this in these words: "Because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us" (Rom 5:5). This means that the first impression on our minds and hearts on this great day of Pentecost should be the affection of the Father toward us - a feeling of fatherly and

fiery love poured on humanity, following the fulfillment by the Son of all the requirements of redemption and salvation, after Christ washed humanity with his blood and purged it thoroughly from her sins, reconciling her to the Father by his cross.

Such is our glorious share in that great day. Such is the treasure of love from which the pious in all time and clime have drawn and which has never been exhausted, the ardent fatherly love which makes us ceaselessly cry: “Abba! Father!” For the Spirit of Pentecost is a fiery Spirit coming fresh from the Father and conveying in its flames his compassion and his great affection which was withheld from man throughout thousands of years.

Spirit of Adoption

I wish we could realize the effectiveness and grandeur of this love for its mystery is so profound. It has proved capable of birth, and it is like a celestial fire capable of transforming our nature just as fire transforms dust into gold. For with the self-same love with which God loved his only begotten Son he chose in this “Divine day” - so to speak - to love us and pour on us his Holy Spirit publicly. He thus turned us from slaves to children and lifted us from earth to heaven, in honor of his Son who came down to our earth and slaughtered himself for our sake.

When Abraham in antiquity obeyed God and was about to slay his son in submission to the voice of God Almighty he received the bounteous grace of God who swore by himself to bless and make him a blessing. But on this Pentecost day with which all our days have been blessed, when Christ had fulfilled the dispensation in the flesh, obeyed his Father even unto death on the cross, ascended and appeared before the Father in his slain body, God did something greater than an oath: his love overflowed on all mankind and He poured on every human his Holy Spirit where all God’s grace, affection and goodness are treasured according as Joel the Pentecost prophet predicted. With this fatherly Spirit the whole world has been blessed.

This love took the form of an adoption bond. For as the Holy Father loved his Son, in the same manner and with the self-same Spirit he loved us and “sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts” (Gal 4:6). Hence the adoption by which we have the full right to call God “Abba! Father!” The Holy Spirit poured on us by the Father is himself that who cries inside us testifying that we are the children of God.

This is the Spirit of adoption which introduced us into the fellowship of the heritage of Christ, that is sonship to God, just as St. Paul says: “But you have received the Spirit of Sonship. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ that is the Spirit itself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ” (Rom 8:15-17).

Thus the Father’s promise of the Holy Spirit was fulfilled, and the process of adoption long promised by the Lord and awaited by the disciples was completed after the Son prepared in himself all its prerequisites, and the disciples met in the upper room according to the command expecting the promise and devoting themselves to prayer with one accord.

And the promise was fulfilled with a fiery unction from the Father, transmitting to man the power of an imperishable life in communion with God, the depth of which is inexpressible and

which we now live in full manifestation. The essence of this life is a fatherly love which in itself is life-giving, bearing the mystery of birth from above.

Great was the joy of Christ on that day when, sitting at the right hand of the Father, He saw the Holy Spirit stamping with the Father's seal the whole dispensation which He fulfilled with his sufferings, and witnessed his disciples adopted by the Father as a church entering upon a new era, the era of the Father's good will, of the eternal love never to be taken away from her.

Christ naturally rejoiced in this because it was the petition he had offered to his Father insistently "that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them" (Jn 17:26). This is the unction of the Father which He poured in accordance with Christ's request, and in honor of his love, upon the church meeting with one accord on Pentecost Day and still meeting as a catholic church until today to receive this same unction of joy and Fatherly love in the same manner as the unction of the "incarnate" Son on the river Jordan when He received the Spirit coming down upon him with the Father's voice: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased."

This equalization between the Father's love for his Son and his love for the new man represented in the church of the apostles meeting in the upper room surpasses all comprehension. The love poured by the Holy Spirit from the Father on the Son has come to be poured also in the same manner and by the Holy Spirit from the Father in the new humanity on all those who accept redemption and adoption in Christ "that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them."

Communion of Love and Light in the Holy Trinity

I have already stated that the Spirit poured from the Father with the unction of love is essentially life in the Father. The Spirit here welds mankind in a communion with the Father, a communion both of love and eternal life, for the love of the Father is the life, and the life in communion with the Father is the ultimate love.

Christ foresaw this wonderful day, the day when the Church would live by the love of the Father, and his soul sensed comfort in the future of his little flock. So he reassured his disciples when the shadow of the cross overwhelmed them with its sorrows, "Because I live you will live also" (Jn 14:19). The source of this life He had already explained by saying: "I live because of the Father." (Jn 6:57), Thus the meaning becomes clear in the combined verses: "I live because of the Father, therefore you will live with me because of the Father."

This is the communion of life with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit which the disciples saw, lived and enjoyed, and which the Apostle John recorded afterwards and told us that it is the same fellowship offered now to us: "The life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us - that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing this that your joy may be complete" (I Jn 1:2-4).

Gifts of the Spirit

As monks we can only feel this fellowship in our depths, the fellowship of love and life with the Father and the Son by the Holy Spirit which was poured on Pentecost Day and which settled in the Church and dwelt in our temples with great meekness and humility.

It is true that the Spirit of Pentecost was tangible and visible as flames of fire. Nevertheless this Spirit has never cooled or died down. His fire is latent in the hearts that know how to enkindle it with prayer, humility and love. The fire of the Holy Spirit is alive and needs only to be blown into. It awaits the oil of grace to inflame the charisms and enhance the unction. Blessed is the man who gathers every day even one drop of this oil, for he shall see how the Spirit burns and how the fragrant smell of Christ spreads abroad. Just as the busy bee gathers her honey from the nectar of flowers, we gather oil through vigil, self-sacrifice, and genuine meekness, through sweet poverty and joyful fasting, through ceaseless supplication, through honoring every man and giving thanks for everything through a tongue which blesses every name. Flowers are plenty in the paradise of the monks, and the hidden nectar can be discovered only by a clever bee.

The Holy Spirit is by nature meek and calm; his voice is never heard and his form never seen except by them that meet with one accord in the intimacy of love awaiting the promise of the Lord, them that open their hearts and lift their eyes to where Christ sits, demanding the right of children and seeking the face of the Father.

To these the Spirit manifests himself as a light for the inner eye and a fire that fills the heart so that every mouth overflows with the praise of God. The young shall see the “Light of the world” in their visions and the old realize him in their dreams.

But let us not forget that through the descent of the Spirit on Pentecost which has shone on the Church since that day and still fills us with life, light and love, we have acquired a share with the saints enduring forever, for He is the Spirit of genuine fellowship extending from the apostles themselves without interruption since that day. We need only hold fast to this Spirit in accordance with the promise, for He is the Spirit of the promise, holy and ever-living. We should hold him with our hearts and never let go, breathe him with our spirits and court him with all affection so that we may attain our full share in him with the saints and with Christ himself. Just as St. Paul says “Giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the Kingdom of his beloved Son” (Col 1:12). This is the utmost wish that Christ persistently implored the Father for: “Father, I desire that they also, whom thou hast given me, may be with me where I am” (Jn 17:24).

The Holy Spirit in Easter and in Pentecost

Some of you have inquired about the relation of Christ’s breathing of the Holy Spirit on his disciples after the Resurrection to the descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. On this St. Athanasius says “Having breathed on the face of his disciples He gave them the Holy Spirit from himself, and in this manner the Father poured him ‘upon all flesh’ as is written” (St. Athanasius’ Epistle on the Holy Spirit, NPNF, vol. IV, p. 96). That is to say that Christ gave him to the

disciples, and the Father gave him to all mankind, which means that the Father completed the work of the Son on the same level or “in this manner.”

I have also consulted St. Gregory the Theologian who states: “And next in the Disciples of Christ (for I omit to mention Christ Himself, in Whom He dwelt, not as energizing; but as accompanying His Equal), and that in three ways, as they were able to receive Him, and on three occasions; before Christ was glorified by the Passion, and after He was glorified by the Resurrection; and after His Ascension, or Restoration, or whatever we ought to call it, to Heaven. Now the first of these manifests Him—the healing of the sick and casting out of evil spirits, which could not be apart from the Spirit; and so does that breathing upon them after the Resurrection, which was clearly a divine inspiration; and so too the present distribution of the fiery tongues, which we are now commemorating. But the first manifested Him indistinctly, the second more expressly, this present one more perfectly, since He is no longer present only in energy, but as we may say, substantially, associating with us, and dwelling in us” (Homily on Pentecost, NPNF, vol. VII, p. 383).

From the above we conclude that the work of the Holy Spirit through the breathing of Christ after the resurrection was a divine act, undefined by St. Gregory, while his descent on Pentecost was a personal existence. Here again St. Gregory did not define the nature of his work.

But it seems that the relationship between the breathing of Christ on his disciples after resurrection, and the descent of the Spirit on Pentecost, is exceedingly strong, and that the one complemented the other. The work of the Son which He fulfilled by incarnation and redemption ends at the new creation: “We have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Pet 1:3). On this creation born after his image, He breathed from his Holy Spirit that it might live, in his capacity as the creator Son and the Second Adam, the life-giving Spirit. But as the perfection of this creation had to be accomplished by the work of the Father, Christ commanded his disciples, even after this breathing, not to leave their place but to await also the “Promise of the Father,” so that after they attained the “Promise of the Son” they waited to attain the “Promise of the Father.” The promise of the Son is in fact a fellowship with Christ because of the Holy Spirit. Christ breathed the Holy Spirit on them after the resurrection that they might have full communion in his death and resurrection as a new creation, for without the Holy Spirit it was impossible for them to obtain a fellowship with Christ. Equally the promise of the Father is a fellowship with the Father because of the Holy Spirit through the acceptance of adoption. It is evident then that the Son’s breathing on his disciples after his resurrection, and the descent of the Holy Spirit from the Father as an unction on Pentecost, both complement one action in man though they are two mystical and separate works like baptism and unction. Each of them is a sacrament of the work of the Holy Spirit (in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost). “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Matt 3:11).

By baptism and unction we now receive these two acts accomplished by the Son (through the breathing of the Holy Spirit after his resurrection) and by the Father (through the fulfillment of his holy promise to the disciples on Pentecost) so that we can obtain what the disciples obtained

after resurrection and on Pentecost, that is the new birth to a new creation, as a living church, as the body of Christ.

Relation of Pentecost to Ascension

The Lord's saying suggests that the sending of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost transmitting the unction of the Father by love and adoption in the fellowship of an eternal life with him, depended on the return of the Son to the Father, conveying in himself the completion of his mission - a new redeemed and perfected humanity - placing her in the position of reconciliation with the Father through the honorable place which He provided us at the right hand of glory in the highest.

Having thus fulfilled his mission, meeting all the will of the Father toward us, removing all obstacles in the way of our living with the Father without blemish, Christ consequently obtained for us the promise of the Father through his sitting at his right hand as an intercessor in favor of the humanity exiled on earth. Hence the words of St. Peter on Pentecost Day: "Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this which you see and hear" (Acts 2:33).

From this we gather that the fellowship with the Father obtained for us by Christ through his incarnation, when He completed it by sitting at the right hand of the Father, was the pledge, the firstfruits, or the perfect pattern which, in Christ's economy, was to be the foundation for the fellowship of the life of mankind with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Hence Christ's work did not end with his ascension and sitting at the right hand of glory in the highest, for it was not possible that Christ should be content - or that "his joy might be complete" - unless his economy were fulfilled by seeing humanity acquiring a fellowship with the Father, an eternal relationship, love and adoption equal to what He procured for us in the body of his humanity. This was the theme of a specific petition by Christ to the Father before his crucifixion: "But now I am coming to thee; and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves" (Jn 17:13).

When the hour was at hand Christ felt that humanity was in dire need of the Spirit of the Father's fatherhood so that man would no longer live an orphan with the sense of a fatherless child. Christ had gratified this need, being the Son coming down from heaven, from the Father's bosom, bearing the image and compassion of the Father. Now that He was leaving them how could they survive without the care and love of God's fatherhood? Hence He promised his disciples that on his ascension He would ask the Father to send them the Comforter, the Spirit of consolation from the Father, bringing to all humanity the affection and compassion of fatherhood as a fellowship of a life enduring for ever with God the Father. Hence his words to his disciples: "I will not leave you comfortless." The Spirit of Pentecost is in fact the Spirit of the compassion of fatherhood for comforting man that he may live as a son in the house of God forever.

On Pentecost Day the Father introduced us into a fellowship with him which is - to some extent - of the sort existing between him and his beloved Son. So much so that the Holy Spirit has come to transmit to us the Father's private talk with his Son, the talk of pure divine love: "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his

own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come...He will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine": (Jn 16:13-15). Thus the Holy Spirit initiated us into the secret of the Father's fellowship with the Son. Isn't that what St. Paul could understand and explain: "For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God," "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him, God has revealed to us through the Spirit," "Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God" (1 Cor 2:9-12)?

Such is the Holy Spirit which the Father poured out on Pentecost in accordance with the holy promise, to acquaint us with what no heart of man conceived, to initiate us into the mystery of the Father with his Son, and to impart to us the fatherly love in recompense of the obedience shown by the Son toward the Father on the cross and his sufferings even unto death, then to bestow on us all the blessings of the secrets of the fellowship between the Father and the Son, just as the Son, through his ascension in the body of our humanity could seat us with him in heaven at the right hand of the Father. For as Christ once seated humanity in his person at the right hand of the Father through his ascension and his own sitting at the right hand of the Father, so did He intercede with the Father that He might send the Holy Spirit on Pentecost to perfect for good and all man's fellowship with the Father at the level of children.

St. Paul reveals to us the essential relationship between Christ's ascension and his sitting at the right of the Father, and the completion of the filling of humanity with the Holy Spirit for entry into the very fellowship completed by Christ in heaven. "He ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things" (Eph 4:10). The words "that he might" show that Christ's ascension was the beginning, the main and perpetual cause for perfecting the filling of humanity in fellowship with God. This is also elucidated by the verse quoted above: "Entered as a forerunner on our behalf" (Heb 6:2).

Conclusion*

Therefore my beloved, I could not write to you about ascension without writing about Pentecost. The connection between them is intimate and essential in the economy of salvation which Christ is still fulfilling by his session as the Mediator at the right hand of the Majesty on high!

Therefore, I bring also your attention to our blessed share in Christ sitting on high, in order not to cease from looking at him through a heart responding to the call of love; for 'our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior' (Phil. 3:20)...When we keep looking above us to where the Sacrifice is, the Father's heart moves towards us to kindle his Holy Spirit in us, in order to finish his work in us to the fullness of the humanity of Christ who sits in his fatherly bosom.