With joy I greet everyone on this great and important Feast of Pentecost!

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.  Amen.

There are those who say that today, Pentecost, is the Birthday of the Church, because it was on this day that the Holy Spirit descended with power in tongues of flame upon the Church gathered in the Upper Room in Jerusalem—that is, the apostles, disciples, and the

Theotokos, who was also present and is always depicted with them in our icons of this feast.  But then there are those who say that actually the Church has existed since Old Testament times, in a simpler and more primitive form, of course, awaiting the fullness and fulfillment that only the Messiah, Jesus Christ our Lord, could bring. Probably both views are right. In either case, the occasion which the Church asks us to commemorate and contemplate today is a *very* great one, both for us Orthodox Christians, and even for the whole world itself, and we must not underestimate it.  Rather, we should try to understand it and see how it applies to our own personal spiritual lives.

We must remember that prior to this event, and prior to the Lord’s Ascension into Heaven, He had already breathed upon his apostles and given them the Holy Spirit.  This is recorded in the New Testament. But the descent of the Holy Spirit commemorated *today* was and is for *the whole Church*, and not just the Apostles, our first bishops, who were the “fountain of the sacraments,” as we say in Orthodoxy.

Therefore, Pentecost is, in a real sense, a Feast of the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the divine and holy Trinity.  And, since one of the Divine Persons cannot be separated from the others, this is also a Feast of the Holy Trinity as a whole, for which reason in Orthodoxy we also call Pentecost “Trinity Sunday” and we also hearken all the way back to the Old Testament theophany or manifestation of the Trinity to the Patriarch Abraham, in the form of the Three Angels, under the Oak of Mamre.

We must remember that God the Holy Trinity is not an impersonal “higher power”, as so many believe today, but rather that He relates to each one of us *completely personally and intimately*.  He is not only closer to us than a whisper in the ear, He is *inside* us!! He is not a distant or uncaring God.  It is our experience that He relates to us primarily through the Second and Third Persons of the Trinity—that is the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, *and* the Holy Spirit--but this morning I want to speak about the activity of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

All of us Orthodox Christians received the Holy Spirit when we were chrismated.  But that mysterious gift is one that must be “activated” by us as we grow up and older in the Church.  The *seeds* of spiritual growth in all the virtues were planted, but those seeds must be nourished by prayer, fasting, tears of repentance and active efforts to change, to grow, and be transformed.  There is nothing “automatic” about this, nor is it magic. Orthodox Christianity is pre-eminently *experiential*, which means that it is about life and living and growth and *change*, even more than it is about theology and worship (important, obviously, as theology and worship are).  And unlike some Protestants we do not believe that we are somehow immediately and instantly “saved” just by accepting Christ—as anyone who reads all of the New Testament *in context* can easily see for themselves.

Those of us who are familiar with the early 19th century saint, Seraphim of Sarov, know that he taught very clearly that the purpose of this life is to acquire the Holy Spirit.  As I said, we receive this incredible gift in the sacrament of Chrismation, but in a hidden and mysterious way, almost a dormant way, so what St. Seraphim was talking about was how we “awaken” this gift and make our union with the Holy Spirit real and intensely active in our personalities and our lives and interactions with others.

A great deal of Orthodoxy—teaching, spirituality, the sacred arts, liturgy, etc.—is devoted, in one way or another, precisely to this subject: how to fully realize or “acquire” the Holy Spirit of God in our lives.  As I said a moment ago, Orthodoxy is primarily an experiential religion rather than a “head religion.”  It is more about what we actually *do* with our minds, our hearts, and our bodies—indeed, with our whole lives—than it is about theology. Don’t misunderstand me: sacred learning is *very* highly valued in Orthodox Christian history and culture.  We are not book-burners or anti-intellectuals!  In fact, my own spiritual father told me long decades ago: “Never let anyone take your books away from you!”  But at the same time he strongly cautioned: if the knowledge you acquire from reading and study isn’t translated into life, into daily practice, then it would be better if you had not acquired that learning.

The patron saint of my spiritual father was St. Seraphim of Sarov, and he—St. Seraphim—was strongly pointed out to me when I converted to Orthodoxy as someone worth paying attention to.  And so I did, and I do, and I will.  Thus, St. Seraphim said the following about acquiring the Holy Spirit—and, really, this is supremely important for us to think about on the Feast of Pentecost, a Feast of the Holy Spirit.  Here are St. Seraphim’s words:

“My joy,” said the saint, “I beg you, acquire the Spirit of Peace.  And that means to bring oneself to such a state *that our spirit will not be disturbed by anything.*”

Well, brothers and sisters, *there’s* a litmus test for us!

St. Seraphim explained what he meant about not being disturbed by anything:  “One must be like a dead man, or absolutely deaf and blind during any sorrow, calumny, accusation or persecution, which inevitably come to all those who wish to follow the saving path of Christ.  For one must go through many sorrows to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. *This* is the way all righteous men were saved and inherited the Heavenly Kingdom.  In comparison to this all the glory of this world is nothing.  All the enjoyments of this world are not even a shadow of that which is prepared in the heavenly abodes for those who loved God…”

In this one short paragraph a relatively recent saint of the Church has given us the ‘formula’, so-to-speak, for how to acquire or “activate”, if you will, the Holy Spirit in a real and full way in our daily lives, and not just leaving Him dormant in our souls from when we were Baptized and Chrismated.  I know that what St. Seraphim said will sound quite radical to many contemporary Orthodox Christians who think that by going to church on Sunday and saying prayers when they think of it or feel like it and perhaps even doing a bit of fasting and spiritual reading, is sufficient.  But these, all good and certainly useful in themselves, often become merely external observances, not penetrating the soul, the heart.  How can we tell?  Simply because *we ourselves are not changing,* not growing, not reforming, and not being transformed. We remain in our sins and our bad habits.

So clearly there is something else, another and deeper dimension to this business of acquiring the Holy Spirit, but it is *very hard* for our ears to hear in this comfort loving culture.  But listen again to St. Seraphim’s words, and keep in mind that he was not giving some “new” or unknown teaching; he was simply echoing the words of our Lord in Scripture and the age old teachings of the Holy Fathers of the Church.  He said:

“*One must be like a dead man*, or absolutely deaf and blind during any sorrow, calumny, accusation or persecution, which inevitably come to all those who wish to follow the saving path of Christ.”  If we had time, I could quote here remarks made by the ancient Fathers of the Egyptian Desert 1500 years ago that say *exactly* the same thing!

The fact is that you and I are not like a “dead man” in the sense in which St. Seraphim was speaking, are we?  Every time we complain about someone or something in the family, in the parish, or at work, we are not simply not accepting the sorrows “which inevitably come to all those who wish to follow the saving path of Christ.”  It’s just that simple.  And, that hard.

Today we have lots of Orthodox men—and also, sometimes, women—both clerical and lay, who spend long years acquiring theological and other degrees and adding mysterious little letters after their name.  This is fine, but don’t be fooled by it, the way so many American Orthodox are fooled, today.  Historically the Orthodox Church has always correctly and narrowly defined a “theologian” as one who is has acquired the Holy Spirit, who is constantly remembering God, and is transformed and changed and become, actually, “holy.”  An academic degree, however useful it might otherwise be, does not automatically do this.

We also now live in a time when there are really countless books about every imaginable aspect of Orthodoxy available in English.  And some people read them, even hoarding them in their libraries, perhaps quoting from them to others…and yet, in their everyday life and their dealings with others, they still greedily hold on to their bitterness, anger, blame, and meanness towards others, just as they have always done.  These books, not having been actually *applied* by them in their lives, were of no use whatever.  Consequently one must ask, “Where is the Holy Spirit in all this, if lives are not being changed?”  The answer is—and if we all gulp when I say this, it would be appropriate—the answer is that *the Holy Spirit is not present and active and working the lives of those of us who do not repent and grow and change and become “as dead men” to the passing problems of this life.*  If you doubt what I am saying, just start reading the New Testament again.

Does this mean that the difficulties and afflictions of life are not real?  Of course not!  They *are* real, and often they are very painful; but God has designed them to be crosses for us to carry willingly and *unmurmuringly* into the Kingdom of Heaven.  That’s all. So that demands that we have a change of mind, a change of attitude, about how we react to and view the dark sides of life.

This is the “inside” of Orthodox spiritual life, rather than the otherwise magnificent and inspiring “outside” that we all know so well already.  This “inside” speaks to us of the need to acquire the Holy Spirit, of the need to have a *direct experience of God*, and not just something we read about or hear from others.  (See “The Search for Truth on the Path of Reason,” by the Orthodox professor, Alexei I. Osipov)  This is why I say that Orthodoxy is more *experiential* than it is *cerebral*, though you wouldn’t know it to look at many of us today.

Therefore, from this day—Holy and Great Pentecost—and from this very hour, brothers and sisters, let us make a commitment to God and to each other *and to ourselves,* that *no matter what* we will seek to acquire the Holy Spirit in our lives, and will not be satisfied with less!

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.  Amen.