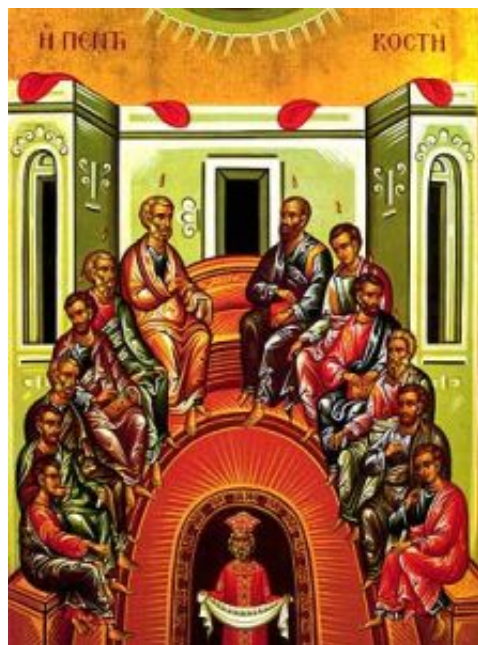




## Those Kneeling Prayers!

This past Monday Eve — that is, on Pentecost Sunday afternoon — we prayed the Kneeling Prayers at the Vespers for Holy Spirit Day, on Monday. I love coming to each feast day, in its distinctiveness, and partake of some unique aspect of the Gospel of Jesus Christ communicated through that liturgical celebration. And Pentecost does not disappoint, with its annual Kneeling Prayers.



Yet, as a priest and the one leading the people of God in these important prayers, I must admit a certain degree of struggle with these prayers. Undoubtedly, “love-hate relationship” is much too strong, but you get what I mean. These prayers are, well, quite long; priests are tempted to read them quickly, which would result in less than full comprehension. They’re read once a year, so there’s no opportunity to absorb them over time by repetition, week by week. They’re written in classic Byzantine style, not certainly in classic English style, with its genius of directness and simple elegance. (You can tell I teach writing, eh?) I wish that I were more pious, less of a sinner, so that such thoughts wouldn’t enter my head like so many birds stealing the fruits of faith, but there you have it.

So, let’s look more closely at them, in order to understand them better. In these Kneeling Prayers there’s actually seven different prayers, done in three sets of kneeling: two in the first set, two in the second set, and three in the third set.

Each set ends, sealed as it were with a lovely capstone, with one of the ancient vespereal prayers for light, from the Great Church of Holy Wisdom, in Constantinople. That much makes sense: praying for light as we re-enter the world from the heady days of Pascha-Pentecost, and enter “ordinary time” in our cycle of the church year. We need the light of Christ in the dark paths of this world, as our Gospel for the Feast proclaimed.

I believe that the latter is important to the content of these prayers: all the talk (prayer) about forgiveness, strength, and even death makes sense as we turn the corner from the glory of Pascha and into the normal



mode of sacramental discipleship. We kneel. We fast. We sin...and confess. We beg for God's mercy. We die...or rather enter into eternal rest in the God of the living. These are the dynamics of authentic spirituality and real life in Christ. Such things always involve struggle, spiritual warfare, and self-denial as we joyfully offer up our lives as a living sacrifice to God, holy and acceptable. They are the core of sacramental discipleship, of preparation and fulfillment in our festal cycles, of self-emptying and divine infilling by the Holy Spirit. Walking in the light is no cakewalk. So, we kneel. And we pray, at length, prayers which embrace the various dimensions of being a Christian seeking the fulness of the Spirit of God this Pentecost season.

St. Paul commanded us to pray with understanding. Certainly this is all the more true on the Great Feast of Pentecost. For on this day the Apostles spoke in languages they did not know, in order to be understood by the crowds of non-Palestinian Jews in Jerusalem for the feast. The holy fathers call Pentecost the Anti-Babel: God's remedy for the confusion of tongues when He judged the builders of Babel. So, we need to understand these Kneeling Prayers. Heed, then, the wise words of the late Father Alexander Schmemmann, onetime Dean of Saint Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, about these special Pentecostal Prayers:

We are invited to kneel. This is our first kneeling since Easter. It signifies that after these fifty days of Paschal joy and fulness, of experiencing the Kingdom of God, the Church now is about to begin her pilgrimage through time and history. It is evening again, and the night approaches, during which temptations and failures await us, when, more than anything else, we need Divine help, that presence and power of the Holy Spirit, who has already revealed to us the joyful End, who now will help us in our effort towards fulfillment and salvation.

All this is revealed in the three prayers which the celebrant reads now as we all kneel and listen to him. In the first prayer, we bring to God our repentance, our increased appeal for forgiveness of sins, the first condition for entering into the Kingdom of God.

In the second prayer, we ask the Holy Spirit to help us, to teach us to pray and to follow the true path in the dark and difficult night of our earthly existence. Finally, in the third prayer, we remember all those who have achieved their earthly journey, but who are united with us in the eternal God of Love.

The joy of Easter has been completed and we again have to wait for the dawn of the Eternal Day. Yet, knowing our weakness, humbling ourselves by kneeling, we also know the joy and the power of the Holy Spirit who has come. We know that God is with us, that in Him is our victory.

Thus is completed the feast of Pentecost and we enter "the ordinary time" of the year. Yet, every Sunday now will be called "after Pentecost" — and this means that it is from the power and light of these fifty days that we shall receive our own power, the Divine help in our daily struggle. At Pentecost we decorate our churches with flowers and green branches — for the Church "never grows old, but is always young." It is an evergreen, ever-living Tree of grace and life, of joy and comfort. For the Holy Spirit — "the Treasury of Blessings and Giver of Life — comes and abides in us, and cleanses us from all impurity," and fills our life with meaning, love, faith and hope.

Source: [Saint Mary Magdalene Orthodox Church](#)