



*THE FAST OF THE APOSTLES
IN THE HOME*



The Fast of the Apostles

In all the historic Churches of East and West the forty days of Pascha recall the time that the risen Christ spent with His disciples. The Feast of the Ascension celebrates His glorious return to the Father – now in His humanity as well as in His divinity. The Feast of Pentecost remembers the Descent of the Holy Spirit on Christ’s followers, empowering them to bring the Gospel to the world.

Christ’s disciples responded to the gift of the Spirit by immediately going out to people and doing the work which Christ has given them to do: “*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations*” (Mt 28:19). Beginning with St Peter’s first address to the Jews in Jerusalem (Acts 2:14-40) the followers of Jesus took the message first to Jews and then to Gentiles throughout the world. They expressed their joy by getting down to the business of their ministry.

It is now time for us to get to work as well. These fifty days from Pascha to Pentecost plus the week-long observance of this latter feast have been times of celebration, roughly coinciding with times of celebration in our secular society as well – Mothers’ Day, Memorial Day, graduations, and the like. But to remind us that our Christian feasts are about the Lord Jesus and His Holy Spirit, not about the pleasure of celebrating, we now return to our ordinary Christian life: exchanging celebration for more intense prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

The time from Pentecost to the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul (June 29) is called the Fast of the Apostles. Since the date of Pentecost depends on when Pascha falls, this Fast may last as long as a month or as little as a few days. In Melkite practice this Fast is usually observed for no more than ten days, from June 19-28.

Since this Fast connects the feasts of Pentecost and the chief Apostles it is a good time to reflect on what these Apostles did after Pentecost as contained in the Book of Acts. We also do well to pray for the Church which, based on their teachings, we have come to speak of as “One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic.” Besides the Feast of the Apostles, this time includes the remembrance of the Nativity of St John the Baptist, (June 24).

You may mark this season by keeping a light burning in your icon corner every day of the Fast. Use the following prayers and reflections periodically over the time of the Fast, as much as you are able. It is suggested that you print each selection and discuss it. Family meal times are considered the most accessible time for such discussions. Display the completed pages on a bulletin board or bind together as a booklet for occasional review.

Living out the season day by day is particularly important in families with children, who always need frequent reinforcement of any action or idea we wish to convey. Some hands-on activities are included for their use, but the discussions and prayers led by their parents will have the most lasting effect.

Holy Apostles, pray to God for us.



1 - What the Apostles Taught

The Fast of the Apostles, the time following the Great Feast of Pentecost, invites us to look at what the first followers of Christ did after the Holy Spirit descended on them at Pentecost. To find out we must look at those New Testament books which follow the four Gospels in our Bibles. The first of them, the Acts of the Apostles, was written by St Luke as a sequel to his Gospel. It describes the coming of the Spirit and the impact it had on their lives.

The Spirit descended upon the Apostles during an important Jewish festival in Jerusalem – Shavuoth, which remembers the giving of the Law to Moses. It was a pilgrimage feast, when Jews from many cities and countries came to Jerusalem. We read in Acts that, when the Spirit came upon the Apostles, many of these pilgrims heard the commotion and came to see what was happening. The first thing the Apostles did was to tell them about the death and resurrection of Christ.

The book of Acts says that St Peter went out to speak to the curious pilgrims. He told them that Christ was risen from the dead. *“Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him”* (Acts 2:22-24).

The second thing St Peter said was that his hearers needed to respond to this message: *“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your*

children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:38-39).

For the rest of their lives the Apostles went from city to city with the same message: Christ is risen – repent and be baptized. This is how the Church was born.

- Look on the Church calendar for the dates of Pentecost week and the start of the Apostles’ Fast. Determine how you will observe this time in your household.
- Read St Peter’s full address on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14-40). Note how the Apostles’ preaching to Jews stressed that the Old Testament was fulfilled in Christ.
- Read Acts 14:8-18 and Acts 17:22-31 to see what the Apostles emphasized when teaching Gentiles.
- Help children recall who spoke to the curious people on Pentecost and what two things he urged them to do.
- Pray that the Lord preserve and strengthen the suffering Churches in the Middle East evangelized by the Apostles.
- Pray the following verses together:

Working through the divine Apostles and stressing the Prophets, Christ, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, has led the nations to the knowledge of God.

As You had promised, O Savior, You granted great miracles to Your disciples, sending them out to preach Your glory to the whole world. To all peoples, they announced the grace of Your Incarnation and Your holy Resurrection.

Holy Apostles, pray to God for us.



2 - What the Apostles Did

The Acts of the Apostles tells us that, before Pentecost, the number of Christ's followers in Jerusalem numbered about 120 (Acts 1:15). With the descent of the Holy Spirit and St Peter's speech to those drawn by the commotion, that number increased. Some of those who heard Peter were baptized and joined the company of Jesus' disciples.

The Apostles formed these believers into a community, the first Church, in Jerusalem. The Book of Acts then tells us about them: *"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved"* (Acts 2:42-47).

This first Church was distinguished by elements that remain the signs of any living Church to this day: devotion *"to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers."* The Apostles' teaching came to be expressed in the New Testament; the doctrinal heart of that message is proclaimed in the Creed. The "breaking of bread" was a first-century name for the Divine Liturgy; "the prayers" were the daily synagogue services, the ancestors of our vespers, orthros and other daily offices.

To this day we find the other notes mentioned in this passage in the life of the Church. There are still *"many wonders and signs*

performed" in the Church by the saints or by the ascetics. Believers still live in common in monasteries where what little they have is often devoted to anyone who has need. Many monasteries regularly welcome pilgrims to share in their daily services and to enjoy the hospitality of the monastics. What the Apostles did with the first believers in Jerusalem remains the pattern for our Church today.

- Discuss how your parish lives the characteristics of the first Church in Jerusalem. How is it devoted to:
 - Teaching and learning;
 - Fellowship and sharing;
 - The Liturgy and the daily prayers.
- What can be done to improve any of these areas of Church life in your community?
- Write each of the four characteristics of the first Christians from Acts 2:42 on separate index cards. Read the verse then, after a few moments, have the children place the cards in the proper order.
- Pray that the Lord preserve and strengthen the suffering Churches in the Middle East evangelized by the Apostles.
- Pray the following verse together:

You have made of the Church a resplendent Heaven, enlightening all the faithful: wherefore we stand in the midst of this holy dwelling-place and we cry out to You: "Make firm this house, O Lord."

Holy Apostles, pray to God for us.



3 – How the Apostles Suffered

The preaching of the Apostles brought even more people to join the followers of Christ. It also attracted the attention of the authorities who responded by arresting the Apostles and putting them in prison “*But at night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, ‘Go, stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life’*” (Acts 5:19-20).

The Apostles went back to the temple area and continued telling people about the Lord Jesus. When the high priest heard about it, he had them tracked down and brought before him. “*And the high priest asked them, saying, ‘Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name?’*” (Acts 5:27-28)

St Peter answered for the other Apostles’ in words which would be echoed by countless Christians ever since: you say “Keep quiet” but God says “Be my witnesses”. Clearly “*We ought to obey God rather than men*” (v. 28). The Apostles were beaten and ordered not to speak in the name of Jesus. We read how the Apostles rejoiced “*that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ*” (vv. 41-42).

Ever since, Christians have had to make similar choices, because the Church has been oppressed at one time or another in every place where it has tried to spread the Gospel. People have faced torture, the loss of their property, and imprisonment, rather than deny Christ. Beginning with the first martyr, St. Stephen (see Acts 6:8-7:60), they have given up their lives as well.

In the past one hundred years Christians have experienced wave after wave of large-scale persecution in the Ottoman Empire, the Soviet

Union, in Africa and the Middle East. In Europe and America some believers have experienced discrimination because of their beliefs or even because they chose to wear a cross in public. But, as Christians have said since the earliest days of Christianity, persecution is like water for the garden which is the Church enabling it to deepen its commitment to Christ its Lord.

- Our Church calls some who suffered for Christ “Great Martyrs” because their suffering was so severe. Learn about and venerate the Great Martyrs George and Demetrius from the persecutions of the Roman era.
- The 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide was observed in 2015. In 1915 Ottoman Turks sought to exterminate all Armenians, most of whom were Christians. Light a candle in memory of those who suffered and died there.
- During the twentieth century militant atheists in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe killed 12 million (the New Martyrs of the Soviet Era) and tortured and countless other believers. Light a candle in memory of them.
- Today militant Islamists (ISIS in the Middle East and Boko Haram in Africa) are killing Christians, destroying their churches, homes and businesses. Pray daily for those suffering for their faith in Asia, Africa and throughout the world, through the intercession of the apostles and martyrs.
- Discuss with children: Did the apostles do anything wrong to deserve to be beaten? Does this remind you of someone who was beaten and was completely innocent? Say that those who suffer for their faith are like Christ.
- Pray the following verse together:

To you, His friends who have gone to their rest, Christ grants unfading crowns and fills you with the contemplation of God. Beseech Him now to save all the Churches.

Holy Apostles, pray to God for us.



4 – *Where the Apostles Went*

Whenever Christians have been driven from a place it becomes an opportunity to bring the Gospel somewhere else. After the death of St Stephen we are told that “*a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles... those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word*” (Acts 8:1, 4). Soon there were communities throughout Judaea, Galilee and Samaria. Even Damascus had its circle of believers.

All these converts were made among the Jewish inhabitants, but in Acts 10 we see Gentiles (non-Jews) accepting the Gospel as well. “*Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only. But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord*” (Acts 11:19-21).

In time most of the Twelve as well as the other leaders of the Church would leave Jerusalem and spread the Gospel to both Jews and Gentiles. In the Acts of the Apostles we see Paul and Barnabas preaching Christ in Cyprus then throughout Asia Minor, and into Europe (Greece and Macedonia). The remainder of Acts focuses on the travels of St Paul, ending with his arrival in Rome.

Various traditions about the other Apostles were recorded by Hippolytus of Rome (170-235) and by the fourth-century bishop of Caesarea, Eusebius, in his *History of the Church*. These apostles and the places where they preached are:

Andrew – Scythia, Thrace and Greece

Bartholomew – Persia and Armenia

James, the son of Alphaeus – Ostrachina in Lower Egypt

John – Ephesus and the island of Patmos where he was exiled

Jude – Edessa and Mesopotamia

Matthew - Parthia

Peter - Antioch, Rome and the places mentioned in 1 Peter 1:1 (Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia).

Philip – Phrygia

Thomas – among the Parthians, Medes, Persians and Indians

Three of the Apostles stayed in Jerusalem: James, the brother of John, who was killed by Herod (see Acts 12:2), Matthias, and Simon the Zealot, who succeeded James, the Lord’s Brother, at the head of the Jerusalem Church.

The Church of Jerusalem is called the “Mother of All the Churches” as it was from this Church that the Gospel spread throughout the world.

The Churches of Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem and Constantinople are called “Apostolic Patriarchates” because of their connection to one or more of the Apostles or their disciples. Several Churches in the ancient world also claim apostolic origins, among them Athens (Dionysius the Areopagite), Crete (Titus), Cyprus (Barnabas) and Ephesus (Timothy).

- Especially remember in prayer the Apostolic Patriarchates and Churches.
- We pray at every liturgy for “the founders of this holy church.” Learn who founded your parish and where they came from.
- Have children Google the unfamiliar place names associated with the Apostles. Learn their location and what they are called today.
- Pray that the Lord preserve and strengthen the suffering Churches in the Middle East evangelized by the Apostles.
- Pray the following verse together:
By their miracles and teaching, Your disciples have illumined the ends of the world, preaching the word of Your Kingdom in many ways, O Savior.

Holy Apostles, pray to God for us.



5 – *The Apostles' Church is One*

As the Apostles, their co-workers and successors developed the Churches under their care, they noted several characteristics of what a local Church should be. Their teachings, recorded in the New Testament, came to be called the “marks of the Church.” They help us see what our own local parish should look like.

The first of these “marks” is unity: the Church is one. Each local community is meant to be united in itself – the parish family – and also to be united with other churches in communion. The eparchy is the first example of our unity with other churches: many parishes with one father, the bishop. Beyond the eparchy, the patriarchate and the worldwide communion of Churches show forth the unity we have with God and with others throughout the world.

St Paul used the image of a human body to show how the Church, though diverse in its makeup, is one. *“Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ... Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it”* (1 Cor 12: 12, 27).

A church, then, the “body of Christ,” is an organic unity. We are one with Christ the Head of the body because of our baptism. And we are meant to show forth that unity with Christ by being one with each other. Because of our human weaknesses, this may take work. We have to go beyond our own concerns, *“bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”* (Eph 4:3).

We know that the Lord wants everyone to hear the Gospel and find life in Him. We often forget that the witness of our unity is essential to the spread of the Gospel. Shortly before His death, the Lord Jesus prayed

for us, His followers *“that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me”* (John 17:21).

Our commitment to the unity of the Church is shown by the way we interact with others in the parish family, by the way we support one another in times of trial, and by the way we welcome visitors to our church. One way of expressing unity with the wider Church is by assisting parishes suffering from wars or natural disasters in our patriarchate and throughout the world. By building unity in the Church we fulfill the prayer of Christ.

- Deepen your relationships in the parish by getting better acquainted with someone you don't know well. Sit with them at the coffee hour on Sunday.
- Deepen your relationships in the eparchy by praying for the bishop and the other parishes listed on the eparchy's website (www.melkite.org).
- Visit a nearby parish in our eparchy and support its activities.
- Discuss unity with children using images of a snowflake or a drop of water. One alone is good, but joined with others they become something more.
- Pray that the Lord preserve and strengthen the suffering Churches in the Middle East evangelized by the Apostles.
- Pray the following verse together:

You made Your Apostles shine with radiant miracles, and You magnified Your disciples throughout the world, O God our Savior, granting them glory and giving them the Kingdom of heaven.

Holy Apostles, pray to God for us.



6 – *The Apostles' Church is Holy*

When we think of holiness in the Church we often think of the saints, and rightly so. But what saints? For the Apostles a “saint” was anyone united to the Holy One by baptism. Thus St Paul would write, “*But now I am going to Jerusalem to minister to the saints.*” (Rom 15:25). We are all “saints” – sharing in the holiness of Christ, in the life of the Trinity as “*partakers of the divine nature*” (2 Pt 1:4).

The Apostles taught that, because of our union with the Holy One, there are consequences for our lives. Our baptism affects what we are to be and what we are to do. First of all, we are to live holy lives: “*As He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, ‘Be holy, for I am holy’*” (1 Pt 1:15). To be holy in all our conduct means that everything we do should reflect the relationship we have with God. We should be a blessing wherever we are – in our workplace, in our social life and especially in our home.

St Peter teaches us further that the Church is a holy people with a purpose “*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light*” (1 Pt 2:9). Our purpose as God’s holy nation is to praise Him as our Savior, which we do whenever we come together for worship or pray along with the Church in spirit in our own homes.

St Peter calls the Church – the saints – a priestly people. As the priests in the Old Testament temple sacrificed animals and other offerings to God, we too are called to offer sacrifice: “*Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ*” (1 Pt 2:4-5). Our sacrifice is spiritual, without the

shedding of blood. It is the Eucharist which we offer “in all and for the sake of all” in union with Christ and His people.

The Church, then, is a priestly people with a holy calling, a communion of saints which includes the Theotokos, the Apostles, the martyrs, all who have gone before, and us as well. The Church is holy and we are that Church.

- The Church is a “holy people.” What in your life does or does not reflect that holiness?
- The Church is a “royal priesthood.” Consider living that priesthood by regularly worshipping in the home. The Horologion contains our daily offices in the full form. *A Book of the Hours* contains them in an abridged form suitable for private use. The *Publican’s Prayer Book* contains a number of canons and akathists as well as the Service of Preparation for Holy Communion useful for family prayer. All are available from the eparchy (www.melkite.org).
- Help children learn to declare the praises of God by teaching them chants from the Divine Liturgy, vespers or other services you may attend.
- Pray that the Lord preserve and strengthen the suffering Churches in the Middle East evangelized by the Apostles
- Pray the following verse together:

The assembly of the Saints has come together in Your love, rejoicing in You. With pure and joyful hearts, they dance with the angels in Heaven in eternal celebration before You, the Lord and God of all.

Holy Apostles, pray to God for us.



7 – *The Apostles' Church is Catholic*

When the Apostles began proclaiming that Christ was risen, they went to places where there were Jewish communities and concentrated their efforts on them. Soon, however, something happened to change that. Chapters 10 and 11 of the Act of the Apostles tell of St Peter's experience with Gentiles in Caesarea and how he was led to admit them into the Christian community. Challenged by some Jewish believers, Peter explained why he felt that he had been led by God. *"When they heard these things they [his challengers] became silent; and they glorified God, saying, 'Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life'"* (Acts 11:18).

As the Church grew it became increasingly diverse, including people of every culture and social class in the ancient world. The unity of the Church was not based on ethnic, cultural or economic reasons, but on Christ. As St Paul would write, *"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus"* (Galatians 3:28).

Years passed, and local Churches developed various practices reflecting regional differences while remaining united in Christ. Different liturgies, disciplines, spiritualities and even theologies arose. While some contradicted the Gospel message (heresies), others were found to be harmonious with it. To be Catholic, then, did not mean to be uniform in practice, but to be united in diversity. Centuries later this principle would be expressed in the saying, *"In essentials, unity; in doubtful matters, liberty; in all things, charity."*

Over the centuries several of these streams came to prevail and characterize the different local Churches. Today we find these "rites," as they came to be called, still flourishing in the different historic Catholic and Orthodox Churches:

Armenian – originating in the first nation to formally adopt Christianity, Armenia;
Assyrian/Chaldean – originating in Mesopotamia and found today in the Chaldean Christians of Iraq and in India's Syro-Malabar Church;
Byzantine – the Greek and Slavic tradition dominant in Eastern Europe and the "Roman" (*Roum*) Middle East;
Coptic – the Egyptian tradition, which also gave rise to the Eritrean and Ethiopian Churches.
Maronite – the Syriac tradition of Lebanon;
Roman – originating in the Churches of Western Europe
Syriac – originating in the Syriac-speaking Middle East. Also found in India's Syrian Churches.

With modern patterns of expansion and immigration all these historic Churches and traditions are now found throughout the world.

- Visit another Eastern Church parish near you. Learn something of its similarities to and differences from our own tradition.
- Explain these differences by comparing them to the four Gospels. They are not identical but they portray the same image of Christ.
- Sample the music and ceremonies of these different historic Churches on YouTube to experience more of this diversity.
- Several of these Churches are experiencing severe oppression in their homelands. Add a prayer for our suffering sister Churches to your daily intercessions.
- Pray the following verse together:

You are the Light existing from before all time. When You willed to descend to my humanity in Your ineffable love for mankind and to take flesh in Your goodness, You made Your Apostles and Disciples become reflections of Your radiant splendor, O Savior. They were sent with splendor to illumine all creation with Your divine Light; by their prayers, enlighten and save our souls

Holy Apostles, pray to God for us.



8 – *The Apostles' Church is Apostolic*

There are several Protestant denominations which were founded with the idea that, after the days of the Apostles, all Christians fell away from the Gospel (until their founder rediscovered it). The historic Churches, on the other hand, hold that they are faithful to the apostolic tradition “which the Word gave, the Apostles preached, and the Fathers preserved. Upon this the Church is founded” (St. Athanasius, *First Letter to Serapion*, 28).

We find the heart of the apostolic tradition in the New Testament but even there we see that not every aspect of that tradition was written down. St Paul tells the Thessalonians “*Stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle*” (2 Thess 2:15). This does not mean that we do things *exactly* as the Apostles did, but that what we do is *in continuity* with their practices and the customs of the Churches they left behind. .

The early Churches had a number of customs which were not written down by the first Christians but passed down in practice. Thus St Basil the Great (330-379) identified the Sign of the Cross and other practices common in his day as elements of that tradition, saying, “Who taught this in Scripture? Which Scripture instructed us that we should turn to the east in prayer? Which of the saints left us in written form the words of invocation during the transformation of the bread of the Eucharist and the Chalices of blessing?” (*On the Holy Spirit*, 27).

The historic Churches see the elements of the apostolic tradition recorded in the most ancient Christian writings, in the Symbols of Faith of the ancient local Churches, in the ancient Liturgies, in the rite of Baptism, and in other ancient prayers, and in the writings of the principal teachers of the Church, the Fathers. These Churches see all

of these elements as developed under the influence of the same Holy Spirit who inspired the Apostles.

Some aspects of these elements have changed over the centuries. Not even St Basil or St John Chrysostom knew akathists or canons, for example, but these prayer-forms are in continuity with the prayer of the Church since its earliest days.

Those practices which are in continuity with the Apostolic Churches reflect the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church. Christ had told His disciples, “*I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Paraclete, that He may abide with you forever*” (Jn 14:16). Our continuity with the Apostolic Tradition witnesses to the abiding presence of that Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, in the Church.

- Not all the practices of our Church today can be called elements of holy Tradition. Some are human customs, like celebrating the anniversary of a priest’s ordination. Others may be abuses, such as charging fees for the holy mysteries. Review the practices of your parish and classify them as holy tradition, customs, or abuses.
- Some aspects of Tradition are more familiar than others. What do you know about icons, the triodion, or the Desert Fathers? What will you do to learn more?
- To help children understand the meaning of Tradition, tell them the story of a practice in your family which you have passed on to them from your parents or grandparents: a special place, a favorite food, a pet expression. These are your family traditions.
- Pray that the Lord preserve and strengthen the suffering Churches in the Middle East evangelized by the Apostles.
- Pray the following verse together:

The Apostles’ preaching and the Fathers’ teaching established in the Church a single and unified Faith Wherefore this Church, robed in the truth of a heaven-inspired theology, explains and declares with certainty the great mystery of Christ.

Holy Apostles, pray to God for us.



9 – *Nativity of St John the Forerunner* (June 24)

What is so special about St John? He has more celebrations than any other saint except the Theotokos. We remember his conception (September 23), his nativity (today), his role in Christ's baptism (January 7) and his death (August 29). Besides that every Tuesday in our weekly cycle is dedicated to his memory. In icons of the deisis and on every icon screen he and the Theotokos flank Christ as the most important of the saints.

We have a clue to his importance in the regular troparion sung in his honor: "As for you, O Forerunner, the Lord's witness is enough." We find Christ's testimony about John in the Gospel: "*among those born of women there is no greater prophet than John the Baptist*" (Lk 7:28).

While other prophets had promised the coming of the Messiah, it was John who announced His immanent arrival ("*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!*" – Mt 3:2) and identified Him when He appeared, saying: "*Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*" (Jn 1:29). And, in the words of our troparion, "Indeed, you were greater than the prophets since you were found worthy to baptize the One they could but announce."

The events surrounding St John's conception and nativity are recorded in Luke 1:5-25 and 57-80. The Scriptural narrative concludes with the canticle uttered by John's father, Zachariah, "*Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel*" in which he prophesied: "*And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways, To give knowledge of salvation to His people By the remission of their sins, Through the tender mercy of our God, with which the Dayspring from on high has visited us; to give light to those*

who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace" (v 76-79).

The village of Ain Karim, southwest of Jerusalem, has long been revered as the place of John's conception and birth. The Greek and Latin churches there today are built on the ruins of older churches dating back to the first centuries, another example of the continuity which the historic Churches have with the first Christian communities.

- Read the Gospel narratives of the conception and nativity of St John (Luke 1:5-25 and 57-80).
- Summarize the story for children, emphasizing the names of John's parents and what the Gospel says about them. Review with questions such as: "Where did Zechariah work? A) Temple B) a bakery C) a candle shop" and "Were Zechariah and Elizabeth? A) Young and hardworking B) Old and sad C) Old and righteous."
- The angel tells Zechariah, "*Your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son*" (v. 13). What is your experience with prayer? Do you feel it is heard? Does God sometimes say, "Wait" or "No"?
- Pray the following verses together:

O prophet worthy of praise, you are the messenger to all, announced by Gabriel, the son of the barren woman, the fairest child of the wilderness, the true friend of Christ the Bridegroom; entreat Him to have mercy on our souls!

Today Elizabeth joyfully gives birth to the last of the prophets and first of the apostles, the earthly angel and heavenly man, the Voice of the Word, the soldier and forerunner of Christ, who exulted in the presence of the promised One of Israel and announced the Sun of Justice before his own birth. Ceaselessly intercede before Him for us who celebrate your memorial with faith.

Holy Prophet, Forerunner and Baptist John, pray to God for us!



10 – *The Leaders of the Apostles Peter and Paul (June 29)*

The Fast of the Apostles ends with the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, the Leaders of the Apostles on June 29 and the remembrance of all the Apostles on June 30. These two men had little in common. Peter was from Galilee, an ordinary tradesman who earned his living by fishing. Paul, from Tarsus in Cilicia was a Roman citizen and a Pharisee, educated in the Jewish Law. What they had in common was their faith in Christ and openness to the Holy Spirit they had received.

Peter was the first of Jesus' disciples to confess, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*" In response Jesus said to him, "*Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven*" (Mt 16:16-18).

At first an enemy of the Apostles, Paul was converted while he was on his way to Damascus to arrest believers among the Jewish community there. He too was given a particular mission by Christ, "*to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel*" (Acts 9:15). Paul would bring the Gospel throughout Asia Minor and into Europe, to Gentiles as well as Jews.

Much of the New Testament is, directly or indirectly, the work of these saints. In addition to the epistles which bear their names, the teachings of Peter and Paul are found in the Gospels and in the

Acts of the Apostles. According to an early tradition, St Mark was the disciple and interpreter of St Peter who put into writing Peter's reminiscences of Jesus. As we see in Acts, St Luke was a disciple and companion of St Paul toward the end of his life who recorded much of what we know about Peter and Paul.

Both these saints ended their lives in Rome in AD 66-68. Peter died a slave's death, by slow crucifixion. Paul, as a Roman citizen, was allowed a more merciful death, by beheading. Peter and Paul laid the foundations of the Church of Rome, which observes this day as its throne feast.

The Church of Antioch also counts these saints as its patrons. According to the Acts of the Apostles, St Paul was a member of the Antiochian Church which sent him forth on his missionary travels (see Acts 13:1-3), While Acts records only one visit of St Peter to Antioch, local tradition has it that he lived there for seven years before he went to Rome. Antioch was at the time the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire and the center for Christian activity in Asia Minor.

- Pray the following verses together:

With what garlands of praise shall we crown Peter and Paul, the greatest of the heralds of the Word of God, distinct in their person, but one in spirit - the one the chief of the apostles, the other who labored more than all the rest? Christ God, who is most merciful, fittingly crowned them both with diadems of glory and immortality.

Let us extol Peter and Paul, the two great lights of the Church: two beacons illuminating the Church with all of God's doctrine. By their preaching, they have led the Gentiles from ignorance to the knowledge of God. Wherefore, the one was nailed to the cross and made his way to Heaven, where he received the Keys of the Kingdom from Christ Himself, while the other, beheaded by the sword, went up in glory to the Savior. Through their prayers, overcome our invisible enemies, O Christ God, and make firm our Orthodox Faith, for You are the Lover of Mankind!