The feast of Pentecost is not merely a celebration of an historical event, which took place in history, neither is it a literal illustration of the text of Pentecost in the book of Acts. The icon of Pentecost, or the decent of the Holy Spirit, is a depiction of the revelation of the Person of the Holy Spirit in the Church and the celebration of a new beginning, a new creation and the birth of the Catholic Apostolic Church. It is the reflection of the theology of the feast and a depiction of its eschatological meaning. The icon of Pentecost reflects the final revelation of the Triune God in His creation; the Spirit is the gift of the Father, which is given through the Son.

“All-Holy Spirit, issuing from the Father and coming through the Son upon the illiterate Disciples, save and sanctify all those who know thee as God.” (EXAPOSTELARION OF THE FEAST)
When we first look at the icon of Pentecost, the first thing we notice is that the dominant colors of the icon are gold and red, an indication of the importance of the event.

The brilliance of gold in the icon reflects the radiant divine light of God. Gold symbolizes the divine nature of God Himself, which manifests in the descent of the Holy Spirit as a Person, consubstantial with the Father and the Son.

The red color is the color of heat, passion, love and life-giving energy. It is a sign of the fiery presence of the Holy Spirit.

“Light is the Father, and Light the Son; Light is the Holy Spirit descending upon the Apostles in fiery tongues, through which the whole universe was illuminated to worship the holy Trinity.”

(EXAPOSTEILARION OF THE FEAST)

The Apostles are seated, forming two rows in a semicircle. The Apostles on the right side row are: (Peter, Mathew, Mark, James, Simon, and Thomas). The 12 Apostle are depicted in the same size and seated at the same level facing each other as an indication of equality, harmony and unity.

Being leaders of the church, St. Peter and St. Paul are seated on the top of the semicircle as an indication to hierarchy in the Church. This hierarchy doesn’t indicate supremacy but rather it complements harmony in respect of being “first among equals”.

In spite of the fact that Apostle Paul, Evangelists Mark and Luke were not present at the day of Pentecost, nevertheless they are depicted among the 12 apostles in the icon of Pentecost. This is an indication that the icon of Pentecost is not a historical depiction of the event but rather a theological expression of the meaning of the feast. Therefore, the 12 apostles depicted in the icon represent the church as a whole.
In the icon we see the Evangelists holding the Gospels, symbolizing their witness to Christ. The rest of the Apostles are depicted holding in their hands open scrolls, symbolizing the teaching authority given to them by Christ.

“At thou hast renewed for thy Disciples, O Christ, a different kind of tongues, that they might therewith proclaim that thou art the immortal Word and God who granteth our souls the Great Mercy.” (VESPERS OF THE FEAST)

At the center of the icon between the Apostles Peter and Paul, there is an empty seat, which represents the seat of the “Teacher”, Jesus Christ, who gathers the Disciples around Him. This seat, however, is shown empty because Jesus Christ has already ascended into heavens in glory and so, for now, He reigns invisibly in the Church through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

At the end of the two rows of the Apostles, at the edges of the semicircle, the icon depicts St. Philip and St. Thomas, the youngest amongst the Apostles. Their beardless face is a sign of their young age. They are seated purposely at the edges as an indication to the continuous renewal of the apostolic succession in the church through the Holy Priesthood. It is through the grace of the Holy Spirit that the Church will continue to present new successors to the Apostles, who will continue the teaching mission in the church until the next coming of Christ.
Above the Apostles, there is a semicircular shape from which there are 12 luminous rays of tongues of fire are radiating and descending on the Apostles as a sign of baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire.

The Holy Spirit is descending in the form of individual tongues of fire as sign of the diversity of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which the Apostles received and we will receive through baptism and the sacraments.

“Light, Life, and a living Fountain is the Holy Spirit, good, upright, Spirit of understanding, and purifying offenses, God understanding, presiding, Distributor of gifts, through whom all the Prophets, the Apostles of God, and the Martyrs are crowned, a strange Report, a strange sight, a Fire divided for the distribution of gifts.” (VESPER OF THE FEAST)

The image of the building behind the Apostles represents the upper room where the Apostles were gathered at the time of Pentecost (Acts 2). The four red pieces of cloth hanging down from the building indicate the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the four corners of the Earth.

“And when they were come in, they went up into an upper room...And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place.” (Act:1:13,2:1)

“The Disciples of Christ being gathered together, there was a sound as of a mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. And they began to speak strange doctrines and strange teachings with divers tongues, to the holy Trinity.” (ORTHROS OF THE FEAST)
Below the Apostles, in the center-bottom of the icon, there is an elderly king that is depicted inside a black background. The elderly king is a symbolic figure of the World “Cosmos”. The black background around him symbolizes "the darkness of sin and the shadow of death" that surround the world.

The king, Cosmos, is depicted as an elderly person to signify the sinfulness of the world since the fall of Adam; it is a symbol of the ancient world enslaved and made old by sin. His long robe symbolizes the long expectancy of the nations to hear the saving message of Christ. The king is dressed with a red robe to signify the bloodstained history of the world as a result of sin. The crown on the head of the king symbolizes sin that dominates and ruled the world. The elderly king is holding in his hand a white cloth containing 12 scrolls, which represent the 12 Apostles, who brought light to the world through their teachings. The white color of the cloth reflects the “light in the world” which entered through the teachings of the Apostles.

Some older Icons of the feast of Pentecost depicted the multitude, mentioned in the book of Acts, as figures from different races and nationalities; which is also a representation of the world. This, however, was replaced by one symbolical figure, which is the Cosmos.

In spite of the small size of the elderly king, who represents the world, nevertheless this figure is of utmost importance to understand the meaning of Pentecost. In fact, as St. Athanasius the Great states: “the ultimate goal of the decent of the Holy Spirit is the sanctification of creation”.

This is the beauty of the movement between the ideal world of the Apostles in the upper half of the icon and the sinful world in the lower half of the icon. It is this synergy between the two worlds that creates a sanctifying movement through the grace and work of the Holy Spirit in the world.

“The then did come down the fire of the Comforter upon the earth in the likeness of tongues, lighting the Disciples and revealing them plainly as initiates of heavenly things. Verily, the light of the Comforter bath come and lighted the world.” (ORTHROS OF THE FEAST)
In the icon of Pentecost we see the fulfillment of the mission of Christ and beginning of the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church through the presence and work of the Holy Spirit. It is a reflection of the baptism of the church with Spirit and Fire. It is an expression of the ecclesiological meaning of the Pentecost and a reflection of its eschatological meaning. It is an open and continuous movement of the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church unto ages of ages. Amen.

“Let us, O believers, celebrate with joy the last Feast, which is also the last of the Feast–Pentecost which is the end and fulfillment of the preordained promise; for then did come down the fire of the Comforter upon the earth in the likeness of tongues, lighting the Disciples and revealing them plainly as initiates of heavenly things. Verily, the light of the Comforter hath come and lighted the world.” (ORTHROS OF THE FEAST)