

# The Dating of Easter

This year Eastern Orthodox Christians will be celebrating Easter on May 1, while the rest of the Christian world celebrates Easter on March 27. This article attempts to clarify the common mistakes of neglecting to take into account the date of Jewish Passover, Pesach, and its week of celebration. It is after its completion that Pascha can be celebrated. This was sanctified by the First Ecumenical Council, which stated that Easter will fall on the first Sunday after the vernal equinox, after the full moon and after the Jewish Passover.

This explanation is given in the hope of improving the understanding of why Eastern Orthodox churches celebrate Easter on or after the date of Western Churches and the Jewish Pesach.

## Responses to the Significance of Pascha Celebrations according to the Julian Calendar

Close to a million Eastern Christians will be celebrating Christ's Resurrection on May 1. These Eastern Christians belong to three major branches of the Christian Church. The largest is the Orthodox Church, organized into some nine church jurisdictions among the largest are the Ukrainian and the Greek, as well as the smaller Canadian, Romanian, Bulgarian, Russian, Serbian, Antiochian and Macedonian. Also celebrating are the non-Chalcedon Christians who are Armenian, Coptic and Ethiopian cultural backgrounds as well as some of the Eastern Catholics, – Ukrainian Eastern Rite – that maintain the Julian Calendar. This Canadian study does not take into consideration the numbers of faithful in the USA, Europe or elsewhere in the world.

When the Eastern Orthodox Churches celebrate Easter one, two, three and as this year, five weeks after the Western Churches, people ask "Why?" The Western Churches and even the Eastern Orthodox Churches ask for an explanation, usually in the form of a question such as: "Why do all Christians not celebrate Easter on the same day?" It seems that during these periods, hasty explanations are offered that seem to satisfy queries until the next season when again the same individuals inevitably ask the same question.

This year, when the date of Easter, according to the Eastern Orthodox Churches, falls on May 1, while the Western Churches celebrate Easter on the 27<sup>th</sup> of March, in response to anticipated inquiries, I have attempted to give an explanation, brief as it may be, of this phenomenon that people ask "Why is it that there is a difference?"

We know from Holy Scripture that Jesus Christ was crucified on a Friday and resurrected on Sunday. We know this because He was crucified during the Jewish Passover week and He was

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*"By His Resurrection He raises up a standard over His saints and the faithful ones for all times – both Jews and Gentiles alike – in the body of His Church. I am convinced He was united with His body even after His resurrection. When He visited Peter and companions, He said to them: Take hold of Me, touch Me, and see that I am not a spirit without a body... After His Resurrection, the Lord ate and drank with them like a real human being..."*

*-St. Ignatius of Antioch (110)*

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removed from the Cross in haste so that His body would not remain on the Cross during the Jewish Passover which was a very holy day for the Jews. We also know that He resurrected after the Jewish Passover which ended on a Saturday, the Sabbath.

As is well-known, the Old Testament Passover was Israel's yearly remembrance of its deliverance from Egyptian bondage. From the time of Moses, the Passover fell on the day from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> of the first lunar

month in the year, Nisan, or Abi), the ancient Hebrew calendar, that is, on the day of the vernal full moon.

Both the Mystical Supper and Christ's Crucifixion occurred on the 14th of Nisan, on Friday, according to the Jewish reckoning of the day. However, by the Roman Julian Calendar, by which the day begins at midnight, Christ's Mystical Supper falls on the Thursday and the Crucifixion on Friday. Christianity, having accepted the Julian calendar of the Romans, made Great Thursday the day of the Mystical Supper's remembrance and Great Friday the day of the commemoration of the holy and saving Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, which corresponds to the tradition of the Synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke.

In the year of our Lord's death on the Cross, the Jewish Passover fell on Friday and Saturday. The Saviour was crucified on Friday, the 14th of Nisan, which, by the Church's liturgical calendar, begins now as back then on Thursday evening. On Saturday He was in the tomb, and early in the morning on the first day of the week – the 16th of Nisan – He resurrected. Therefore, the events of the Passion, death and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ are inseparably bound up with Jewish Passover. Already from the 1st century of Christianity, it became the custom to celebrate Holy Pascha after the Jewish Passover. This was perpetuated by the Holy Apostles, who prescribed that the Christian Pascha be celebrated following the Jewish Passover, after the vernal equinox (Canon VII of the Holy Apostles): "If any bishop, or presbyter, or deacon celebrated the Holy Day of Easter before the vernal equinox with the Jews, let him be deposed."

**"God, Who first established this feast for us allows us to celebrate it each year. He Who gave up His Son for our salvation, from the same motive gives us this feast... allowing us to pray together and to offer common thanksgiving... He gathers to this feast those who are far apart..."**

**- St. Athanasius (373)**

First Ecumenical Council concerning the calculation of the date of Easter were handed down to us by the Council of Antioch in 341 A.D., which had received the decision concerning Easter from the First Ecumenical Council. This is also corroborated by the testimonies of Athanasius the Great and St. Epiphany of Cyprus.

**"He suffered for the sake of those who suffer... but He rose from the dead. I am the Christ; I have destroyed death... I am your forgiveness. I am the lamb that was immolated for you. I am your ransom, your life, your resurrection..."**

**- St. Melito of Sardis in Lydia  
(180)**

This regulation is the basis of the Canons of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea called by Emperor Constantine in 325 A.D. In the First Ecumenical Council the entire Christian Church of the East and the West was represented by 318 Bishops. Therefore, no authority of the Church could oppose or change this unanimous decision except through another Ecumenical Council. This Holy Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. decreed the regulations for the calculation of the date of Easter for the whole of Christianity in order that all Christians might celebrate Easter on the same day every year. The regulations of the

These regulations of the First Ecumenical Council are as follows: “Easter is to be celebrated on the first Sunday after the first full moon, after the spring equinox, after the Jewish Passover”.

It should be noted here that Cyril the Patriarch of Alexandria stated in his Paschal Circular: “The Ecumenical Council unanimously voted that the Church of Alexandria, because of its noted astronomers, would announce to the Church of Rome every year the date of Easter, and Rome in turn would announce it to the other churches”. This did not mean that the Church of Rome would determine the date of Easter, but that she would announce it to the Churches of the West, after the date was determined by the Church of Alexandria.

The striving of Pope Gregory XIII in 1582 by drawing up a new calendar to rectify what seemed to him to be a violation of the Church canons on the celebration of Pascha turned into a violation of one of the basic canons of the Church. Thus, by celebrating Holy Pascha before the Jews or together with them, the followers of the Gregorian reform began to violate Apostolic Canon VII, the decrees of the Nicean Council and Canon I of the Local Council of Antioch. To change the sequence of events about which the Gospel speaks to us is to distort them. Mystically, the New Testament Pascha symbolizes the replacement of the Old Testament sacrificial offering of the lamb by the redeeming sacrifice of our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lamb Who takes upon Himself the sins of the world (Jn 1:29).

Between 1851 and 2016 alone, the followers of the Gregorian calendar celebrated Pascha 25 times before the Jews and more than once together with them: for example, April 1, 1923, April 17, 1927, April 15, 1954, April 19, 1981, March 30, 1997, March 27, 2005 and March 23, 2008. In 2016 Pesach is April 27, Gregorian Easter is March 27, while Julian Pascha is May 1. Once again, this rule will be further broken.

### Recommended Reading:

- Abboud, Rev. Gregory. (1964). *The Holy Date of Easter*. Brooklyn, N.Y.
- Calivas, Alkiviadis. (1990). The date of Pascha, the need to continue the debate. *Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, 35(4).
- Makris, Rt. Rev. Kallistos. (1971). *The God-Inspired Orthodox Julian Calendar vs the False-Gregorian Papal Calendar*. Chicago, IL.
- Molchanov, Very Rev. Boris. (1982). *The Calendar Question*. Montreal, QC.
- Perepiolkina, Ludmilla; The Julian Calendar – A thousand-year icon of time in Russia. *Eastern Churches Journal*, 3(2).
- Peter (L’Huiller), Most Rev. Archbishop. (1994). The date of Orthodox Easter. *Solia*. March.
- Sakkas, Rev. Basile. (1973). *The Calendar Question*. Jordanville, N.Y.
- Talley, Thomas. (1986). *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*.

Therefore, the decree of the Local Council of Constantinople in 1583 that declared the Gregorian Calendar to be noncanonical remains in force. The *Sigilion*, or Encyclical Epistle, of this Council, signed by the three Eastern Patriarchs – Jeremias of Constantinople, Silvester of Alexandria and Sophronias of Jerusalem – and the rest of the hierarchs at the Council proclaims, “Whosoever does not follow the customs of the Church and what the Seven Ecumenical Councils have ordained concerning Holy Pascha and the *Menologion* (fixed Feasts) and have well-enacted for us to follow, but desire to follow the Gregorian *Paschalia* and *Menologion*, he, as well as the godless astronomers, opposes all the decrees of the holy councils and wants to change and

weaken them; let him be anathema and excommunicated from the Church of Christ and the assembly of faithful.”

Consequently, the reproaches against the Orthodox Paschalia for “backwardness” with respect to science are the fruit of misunderstanding and prejudice. As well, unfamiliarity of the complex of problems bound us with the most complex question of the ecclesiastical Julian Calendar.

I shall take the liberty of finishing this explanation of the differences in dates for

Easter and the use of the Julian calendar with words of an Orthodox monk: “Time is a great mystery, and one can touch a mystery only through symbols. The Julian calendar is an icon of time. If we want to naturalize the concept of time, as the icon has been naturalized, turning into a portrait, then why must we be oriented to the Gregorian style? There are even more accurate calendars. There is the calendar of the Incas, there is the calendar of Omar Khayyam, which possesses brilliant mathematical merits and perhaps tomorrow some kind of new calendar will appear that is even more astronomically accurate. But we must turn to observations with an outstretched hand. We, the Church, have those mysteries concerning time which are written in the Bible and in the Patristic works. We are the bearers of these mysteries and must reveal them to the world”.

**“The reign of life has begun, the tyranny of death is ended... This is the day the Lord has made – a day far different from those made when the world was first created, and which are measured by the passage of time. This is the beginning of a new creation. On this day, as the prophet said, God makes a new heaven and a new earth.”**

***- St. Gregory of Nyssa (384)***

*-Very Rev. Archpriest Bohdan Demczuk*