

Why is Pascha so late this year?

*A summary of how the Orthodox Church
determines the date for celebrating
the Resurrection of Christ*

Dear Religious Educators:

I'm sure an important question that will be raised this year by students and others is, "Why is Easter/Pascha so late this year?"

Orthodox Christians begin the Triodion this weekend. The Triodion is the liturgical book of hymns that is used between this weekend and Holy Saturday evening. Triodion refers to the "three odes" of the canons sung in Orthros/Matins in this period. We open the Pentekostarion book and begin using it from the Resurrection Service through All Saints day (this year it is June 30 – and yes, there is no Apostles Fast this year because of this). A millennium ago, this was one book, making a strong reminder of how both seasons are connected. But even separate they are very large books and with the advent of printing, separating the one book into two for ease of use was done.

In 2013, Pascha/Easter is May 5, while Western Christians and Eastern Catholics will celebrate Easter on March 31 (Our Eastern or Byzantine Catholic friends began Great Lent on February 11, Clean Monday. The Orthodox Church of Finland by law follows the Western date for Easter, so they too will celebrate Pascha on March 31.).

Why so late? Why the difference between East and West. The issue is complicated and goes deep into history.

Recall that in the first three centuries of Christianity, Christians were divided about the date for celebrating the Resurrection. Some had fixed the date; others celebrated with Passover, others on a Sunday after Passover. One of the main issues of the First Ecumenical Council in 325, in Nicaea, was unifying Christians on the date for celebrating the most important Feast of the Church.

Dr. Lewis Patsavos's article, "The Calendar of the Orthodox Church" explains the decision of Nicaea and what has transpired since then to, once again, create divergence in the date of Pascha between East and West:

The determination of the date of Easter is governed by a computation based on the vernal equinox and the phase of the moon. According to the ruling of the First Ecumenical Synod in 325, Easter Sunday should fall on the Sunday which follows the first full moon after the vernal equinox. If the full moon happens to fall on a Sunday, Easter is observed the following Sunday. The day taken to be the invariable date of the vernal equinox is March 21.

Herein lies the first difference in the determination of Easter between the Orthodox Church and the other Christian Churches. The Orthodox Church continues to base its calculations for the date of Easter on the Julian Calendar, which was in use at the time of the First Ecumenical Synod. As such, it does not take into consideration the number of days which have since then accrued due to the progressive inaccuracy of the Julian Calendar. Practically speaking, this means that Easter may not be celebrated before April 3 (Gregorian Calendar), which had been March 21 – the date of the vernal equinox – at the time of the First Ecumenical Synod. In other words, a difference of 13 days exists between the accepted date of the vernal equinox then and now. In the West, this discrepancy was addressed in the 16th century through the adoption of the Gregorian Calendar (promoted by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582).... Western Christians, therefore, observe the date of the vernal equinox on March 21 according to the Gregorian Calendar.

The other difference...concerns the date of Passover. Jews originally celebrated Passover on the first full moon after the vernal equinox. Christians, therefore, celebrated Easter on the first Sunday after the first full moon following the vernal equinox. After the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD and the other tragic events which gave rise to the dispersal of the Jews, Passover sometimes preceded the vernal equinox. This was occasioned by the dependence of the dispersed Jews upon local pagan calendars for the calculation of Passover. As a consequence, most Christians eventually ceased to regulate the observance of Easter by the Jewish Passover....

As an alternative to calculating Easter by the Passover, “paschal (Easter) cycles” were devised. The Orthodox Church eventually adopted a 19-year cycle, the Western Church an 84-year cycle. The use of two different paschal cycles inevitably gave way to differences between Eastern and Western Churches regarding the observance of Easter. Varying dates for the vernal equinox increased these differences.

So, just in case you got a little confused (and this issue can be confusing), let me summarize.

The Orthodox Church relies on the Julian Calendar for determining the date of Pascha and the Lenten and Paschal cycle (although we rely upon the New Calendar for all other Feasts – this is a long story unto itself!). The Julian Calendar is 13 days behind the Gregorian Calendar.

Even though some Orthodox Churches use the Julian Calendar for all Feasts (e.g, the Russian and Serbian Churches) and some use the New Calendar for some Feasts (e.g. the Greek and Antiochian Churches), all Orthodox Christians (with the exceptions above) celebrate Easter/Pascha on the same *Sunday*, but they give it a different *date*. This year May 5 on the New Calendar, which is April 22 on the Julian Calendar.

The date of the vernal equinox is fixed on March 21 on the Julian Calendar which is April 3 on the New Calendar. (But the equinox happens on March 20 or 21 on the New Calendar. Around that time start watching the moon too and you will be able to figure out the calculations too!). This begins pushing the date of Pascha later for the Eastern Churches.

Because of the Jewish dispersion in the first century, Christians were advised not to look to the Jewish celebration of Passover as a guide to determining the date of the Christian Pascha.

The Church, using the formula of Nicaea and astronomy (which allows us to predict the equinox and the phase of the moon long into the future), developed tables setting the date of Pascha well into the future (I have seen books that offer the date of Pascha for one hundred years.). The East uses a 19-year cycle.

Can all Christians return to a common date for Pascha for all Christians? The Julian Calendar will continue to fall behind, complicating the problem in time. Even the Gregorian Calendar will become inaccurate, forcing the whole world to fix its calendar. Since 325 and 1582 astronomical information has grown considerably, to say the least. In the early twentieth century, an impetus for dialogue among Christians and the Ecumenical Movement itself was to return to a common date of Easter. A solution still eludes us, but in 1997, Christians of East and West gathered in Aleppo, Syria to study the question and to propose a solution, so that all Christians could once again celebrate the Resurrection of the Lord together. Attached is a link to the their work.

<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/faith-and-order-commission/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/towards-a-common-date-for-easter/towards-a-common-date-for-easter.html>

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