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Pope Francis gives his homily during an ecumenical evening prayer service marking the end of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity Jan. 25, 2025, at Rome's Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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Rome — January 27, 2025
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Celebrating the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, Pope Francis reaffirmed the Catholic Church's willingness to accept a proposal for a common date for celebrating Easter in the West and the East.

Noting that in 2025 the date coincides on the West's Gregorian calendar and the East's Julian calendar, Francis said that "I renew my appeal that this coincidence may serve as an appeal to all Christians to take a decisive step forward toward unity around a common date for Easter."

"The Catholic Church is open to accepting the date that everyone wants: a date of unity," he said Jan. 25 during an ecumenical evening prayer service at Rome's Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls.

The service marked the end of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, which focused on this year's celebration of the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, which gave Christians a common Creed and a formula for determining a common date for the celebration of Easter.

Before the Council of Nicaea in 325, different Christian communities celebrated Easter on different dates; the council decided that for the unity of the Christian community and its witness, Easter would be celebrated on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox.

But the Julian calendar, which is what Christians used in the fourth century, was increasingly out of sync with the actual solar year, so March 21 — generally assumed to be the date of the Northern Hemisphere's spring equinox — gradually "drifted" away from the actual equinox.

In 1582, Pope Gregory XIII reformed the calendar, dropping 10 days and making the equinox fall on March 21 again. Most Eastern Christians did not adopt the new calendar, leading to a situation where Easter occasionally is on the same day, but Eastern Christians' celebration can be as much as four weeks later.

Francis has reaffirmed on several occasions the position officially taken by St. Paul VI in the 1960s that if Eastern Christians agree on a way to determine a common date for Easter, the Catholic Church would accept it.

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The ecumenical prayer service began with Francis praying before the tomb of St. Paul. He was joined by Orthodox Metropolitan Polykarpos of Italy and Malta and by Anglican Archbishop Ian Ernest, director of the Anglican Center in Rome. The Orthodox and Anglican bishops also joined the pope at the end of the liturgy in giving their blessing to the crowd.

The theme of the 2025 week of prayer was Jesus' question to Martha of Bethany: "Do you believe this?"

In the Gospel of John, Martha tells Jesus that if he had been there, her brother Lazarus would not have died. Jesus tells Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live," and then he asks if she believes. Martha responds with a declaration of faith: "Yes, Lord. I have come to believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world."

Francis said, "This tender encounter between Jesus and Martha from the Gospel teaches us that even in times of desolation, we are not alone, and we can continue to hope. Jesus gives life even when it seems that all hope has vanished."

"Hope can falter following difficult experiences such as a painful loss, an illness, a bitter disappointment or a sudden betrayal," the pope said. "Although each of us may experience moments of despair or know people who have lost hope, the Gospel tells us that Jesus always restores hope because he raises us up from the ashes of death."

Sometimes, the pope said, people may feel like the search for Christian unity has reached a dead end or that ecumenical dialogue is "doomed to failure."

"All of this makes us experience the same anguish as Martha, but the Lord comes to us," he said. "Do we believe this? Do we believe that he is the resurrection and the life? That he rewards our efforts and always gives us the grace to continue our journey together? Do we believe this?"

The anniversary of the Council of Nicaea is "a year of grace, an opportunity for all Christians who recite the same Creed and believe in the same God," the pope said. "Let us rediscover the common roots of the faith; let us preserve unity! Let us always move forward! May the unity we all are searching for be found."