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Catholic-Orthodox seek common Easter date

by Jerry Filteau



Orthodox Christians pray on Good Friday at the Stone of Unction, believed to be the place where the body of Jesus was prepared for burial, in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in this 2009 file photo. (CNS)

WASHINGTON ? It's been under discussion for decades, but North American Catholic and Orthodox scholars and church officials have now asked their churches to give urgent priority to restoring a common date for celebrating Easter across the world.

"Time is of the essence," the North American Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation said in a statement released in Washington Oct. 7. (See **Catholic-Orthodox urged toward reunion.**)

The consultation, the official dialogue sponsored by the Orthodox and Catholic bishops of the United States and Canada, met Sept. 30-Oct. 2 at Georgetown University.

A key time element calling for action now, the consultation said, is the fact that this year and next Eastern and Western Christians happen to celebrate Easter on the same date;. It will happen again in 2014 and 2017, but then, unless an agreement is reached, it won't happen again for the next 17 years.

The belief that Christ died for our sins and rose on the third day is "the center of our faith," the statement said. "We look forward to the entire Christian world proclaiming the joy of the Resurrection together again next year. We are convinced that the time is at hand for a permanent resolution of this issue."

The theologians and church officials in the North American consultation repeated their 1998 call for Catholic, Orthodox and other Christian churches to adopt the principles for a common Easter date set out by the 1997 Aleppo Statement -- a widely endorsed consultation of Orthodox and Western Christians in Aleppo, Syria, that sought to find a definitive solution to the centuries-old divergence among Christians over a common date for Easter.

The North American consultation's statement is titled, "Celebrating Easter/Pascha Together." Pascha (found in other Latin-or Greek-based English phrases like the Paschal Lamb or the Paschal mystery) is the common term used in the Orthodox churches to refer to Easter, deriving from translations of the Hebrew "Pesach," or Passover feast.

The Synoptic Gospels report that on the eve of his death Christ celebrated a Passover meal with his Apostles. He was crucified the next day (Friday), buried quickly before the sundown start of the Sabbath (Saturday), and rose on the third day (Sunday) ? making Easter the first Sunday after the Passover, which is determined by the first full moon after the vernal equinox.

Eastern and Western Christianity have diverged in the celebration of Easter since 1582 when Pope Gregory XIII, using contemporary astronomical calculations, ordered a 10-day correction in the Julian calendar ? established by Julius Caesar in 46 B.C. ? to determine the date of the vernal equinox and the first full moon after that event.

Jews determine Passover in relation to the first full moon after the vernal equinox according to the Hebrew lunar calendar. The Julian, and later the Gregorian, solar calendars have come to be widely accepted globally as civilian solar calendars.

Since the late 16th century, the difference between the longer Julian calendar ? which inserts a leap day every four years without exception ? and the shorter Gregorian calendar ? which eliminates one leap day every century year unless it is a century evenly divisible by four (1600, 2000, 2400, etc.) has grown by three days. The gap is currently 13 days and will increase to 14 in 2100.

As a result, Orthodox churches that still follow the Julian calendar to determine the Paschal equinox and subsequent full moon usually celebrate Pascha one to five weeks after Western Christians, although the Western and Eastern dates occasionally coincide.

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The Aleppo Statement cited four principles for establishing a common date for Easter/Pascha:

- The ecumenical Council of Nicea in 325 A.D., which sought to establish a common date for the celebration of Easter throughout Christianity, recognized the intimate connection between the Jewish Passover observance and Jesus' last supper, death and resurrection; hence any attempt to set a fixed solar-year date for Easter, such as the second Sunday of April, ignores the Passover connection and should be rejected.

- "The ecumenical council held at Nicea in 325 A.D. determined that Easter/Pascha should be celebrated on the Sunday following the first vernal full moon." Modern Christian observance of Easter/Pascha should follow that norm.
- Nicea used the astronomical science of its day to determine when the first vernal full moon occurred; the principle used by that council should be followed today, using the best observations of contemporary science.
- Since Jesus celebrated his final Passover meal before his death in Jerusalem, the modern scientific calculations of the first full moon after the vernal equinox should be based on when that first full moon occurs in Jerusalem. (Calculations elsewhere in the world could lead to dating it one day earlier or later, changing the calculation of the following Sunday by up to a week.)

The Aleppo statement made three fundamental recommendations on the observation of Easter/Pascha for all Christian churches:

- "To maintain the Nicene norms ? that Easter should fall on the Sunday following the first vernal full moon.
- "To calculate the astronomical data (the vernal equinox and the full moon) by the most accurate possible scientific means.
- To use "as the basis for reckoning the meridian of Jerusalem, the place of Christ's death and resurrection."

The North American consultation called for "careful education and pastoral sensitivity" in moving toward a universal common Christian observance of Easter/Pascha, but it said the task is urgent.

"For the mission of the church, a common celebration would support the unity we already share and help to build it further in the future," it said.

Agreement on the Aleppo principles for common future dates of the observance of Easter/Pascha would entail a major adjustment for most Orthodox churches, since the Julian calendar calculations on which they base their observance departs in most years from both Gregorian calendar calculations and the more precise modern astronomical calculations.

For Catholics and other Western Christians, a shift from the Gregorian calendar calculations to current astronomical data based on the Aleppo principles would entail very few changes, including just one in the next 15 years

In 2019, according to a table put out by the World Council of Churches, Easter would occur on March 24 by modern astronomical reckoning because the first vernal full moon occurs on March 21. By the Gregorian calendar calculations, Easter would occur that year on April 21, and by Julian calendar calculations it would be on April 28. By current Jewish reckoning Passover begins that year on April 20.

[Jerry Filteau is NCR Washington correspondent.]

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