

A Joint Examination of the Calendar Question and a Common Pascha by Way of the Ecumenical Movement*

It is well known that, in order to promote their unionist agenda, the ecumenists, especially in recent years, have been endeavoring to implement the common celebration of Pascha by all Christians from 2001 onwards.

The organization by the World Council of Churches and the Middle East Council of Churches of a pan-Christian consultation in Aleppo, Syria (5-10 March 1997), on the subject of the common celebration of Pascha previously gave us the opportunity to undertake a brief historical survey of recent developments in this area and to observe that

The broaching of this whole question has provided an opportunity to understand fully that the joint pan-Christian celebration of Pascha has never been an internal pastoral problem for the Most Holy Orthodox Church, but clearly emerged out of the ecumenical movement from 1920 and onwards; the ecumenical movement envisions that, by means of steady practical steps, it will bring about the external (federal) unity of divided Christians, thereby giving the world the illusion of a common Christian witness, in spite of the unbridgeable dogmatic differences that still exist.¹

A recent document published by the WCC informs us that “Churches throughout the world continue to reflect on the challenge” “of a common celebration of Pascha,” as proposed at Aleppo, and that “preliminary responses” have already been received, while for “the year 2001 another conference concerning a common date for Pascha is scheduled, and this conference will assess the progress made so far and will plan further action.”²

Old Calendarist anti-ecumenists have always detected a dogmatic and ecclesiological basis in the attempt to produce a unified calendar for East and West. The 1920 Encyclical, by which “the Ecumenical Patriarchate laid down the golden rule of Orthodox ecumenism (Zander), as well as the charter for the attitude that the Orthodox party in the ecumenical movement should in the future observe (Stavrvides, Konidaris),” and which “constitutes a definitive expression of Orthodox ecumenism, and also a milestone in the history of the ecumenical movement,” proposed—as a sign of syncretistic “friendship,” “a good disposition,” and “contact between different Christian Churches” (that is, “the whole Body of the Church”[!])—the acceptance of a “single calendar for the simultaneous celebration of the major Christian feasts by all the Churches.”³

Likewise, the “Pan-Orthodox Congress” in Constantinople (10 May-8

June 1923), under Patriarch Meletios (Metaxakis), occupied itself with a variety of topics, “among which that of the calendar was at the forefront.” The participants in the Congress were preoccupied with this topic, conscious that they were “members of a pan-Christian brotherhood,” and convinced that “the time had come for the reconciliation of Christians, at least on this point (*viz.*, the common celebration of Pascha), and they especially emphasized the necessity of “the simultaneous celebration of the major Christian feasts of Christmas and Pascha by all Christians,” since through this (con)celebration “the rapprochement of the two Christian worlds of the East and the West” could be accomplished.⁴

Consequently, the following observation of the truly momentous “Memorandum Concerning Ecumenism” is quite correct:

Undoubtedly, the tendency to indulge in idle talk about concelebration with the heterodox began during the twentieth century that has now passed by, when a change in the ecclesiological perceptions of the Orthodox not only occurred, but was also cultivated, that is, ever since the Orthodox began to relinquish the ecclesiological principle, enshrined in the lives of the Saints and the writings of the Fathers, that the Orthodox Church constitutes the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church of the holy Symbol of Faith.⁵

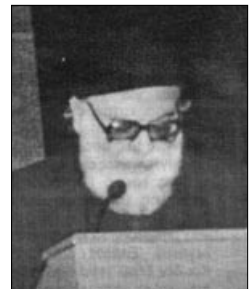
Through the prism of all of the foregoing comments, we can now understand in the clearest possible way what is meant by the joint examination of the calendar question and a common Pascha by way of the ecumenical movement, as does Father George Metallinos in the brilliant article that follows. Only on these conditions is it possible for a truly Orthodox unifying synod to confront the “division” among the Faithful, by assembling, as the Seventh Ecumenical Synod states, “for the union and harmony of the Church.”⁶

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The Argument Is Not One of Calendars: It Is Conflicting Dogma and Theology That Lead to Separate Celebrations of Pascha⁷

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The Resurrection of Christ is not only the unshakeable foundation of our Faith (“If Christ be not raised, your faith is vain” [I Corinthians 15:17]), but also brings to mind the tragic division in the Christian world of our era. The goal of ecumenical



or inter-Christian dialogue is precisely to remove this division and to restore unity. Indeed, in ecumenical circles, the common celebration of Pascha is considered to be an essential step in this direction. The decision to change the calendar (1923-1924)—a hasty decision that was not pan-Orthodox—led to the common Christian celebration of Christmas (and the immovable Feasts), but not to that of Pascha (and the movable Feasts), which continues to be determined in the Orthodox world on the basis of the Julian (Old) Calendar. A recent Patriarchal Encyclical (No. 150/26 May 1995) raises the question of the necessity of “determining” “a common date for the celebration of the Great Feast of Pascha by all Christians,” thereby promoting a unionist course.

We should not forget, however, certain fundamental historical and theological constants which decisively determine the meaning of Christian (Church) Feasts and our liturgical experience of them, as in the case of Pascha:

(a) Many Orthodox rightly maintain that the impediment to celebrating Feasts at the same time as the non-Orthodox is not the difference in calendars, but the difference in dogma and theology; that is, our non-convergence on matters of faith, given, in particular, that “faith” in the unbroken Christian Tradition, which is continued in Orthodoxy, is not a simple—either perfunctory or scholastic—acceptance of certain disincarnate “truths” of an absolute nature, but, rather, participation in a way of life handed down by the Apostles and the Fathers, which leads to our experiencing the Holy Spirit. This experience, when formulated in words, constitutes the Faith of the Church as the Lord’s Body.

This is how we should understand the Church’s canonical injunction—from the First Ecumenical Synod, which, in 325 A.D., resolved the issue of the celebration of Pascha once and for all down to the present day—“not to keep feast with the Jews,” which is tantamount, today, “not to keep feast with the heterodox.” This is not a fruit of religious bigotry, but the expression of a healthy and active ecclesiastical self-awareness. For this reason, as far back as 1582, the Orthodox East rejected the “New” Calendar, not for scientific, but for ecclesiological reasons, since the introduction of this calendar was linked both by Westerners and by our own unionists with the imposition of a simultaneous observance of feasts as a (*de facto*) facilitation of union “from the grass roots” (on a broad basis). This spirit was embodied in the controversial Encyclical of 1920, which proposed “the acceptance of a single calendar for the simultaneous celebration of the major Christian feasts by all the Churches.” We will not dwell, here, on the fact that this Encyclical places Orthodoxy and non-Orthodoxy on the same level. We will, however, recall that, while certainly paving the way for ecumenism, it nonetheless served to provoke the genesis of the “Old Calendarist” question, which remains a tragic and traumatic experience in the body of the Orthodox Church and ought, for

this very reason, to be resolved prior to any partial or broader settlement in the domain of “ecumenical” dialogue.

(b) The precondition for the common “celebration of Christian feasts” is not agreement over the calendar or diplomatic and legal accords, but “the unity of faith and the communion of the Holy Spirit”; namely, adherence to an understanding of Christianity as a “spiritual hospital” (St. John Chrysostomos), that is, as an existential and social hospital and as a method of therapy. The ideologizing of Christianity or its academic formulation—maladies resulting from ecumenical dialogue—not only do not lead us to the unity we desire, but actually take us away from it. The unity and union which culminate in the Holy Table and the Holy Cup require “unanimity” in faith and in Christian life as a whole; that is, acceptance of the Apostolic Tradition in its totality and incorporation into it. It is for precisely this reason that worship and the liturgical tradition alone do not constitute a basis of unity, as those engaged in ecumenical dialogue widely, but erroneously, believe. Worship and participation in worship are not efficacious in soteriological terms, outside the aforementioned context of a common ecclesiological tradition. The perennial prayer of the Orthodox believer is for “the restoration and reunion of the erring” to the Body of Christ, the One Church (Liturgy of St. Basil the Great).

In this way, the amphidromic force of the statement of St. Paul, which we cited at the beginning, is justified: “If the Resurrection of Christ is the foundation of our Faith, then authentic Faith is the sole precondition for participation in the Resurrection as the greatest event of our salvation in Christ.”

* Source: *Ὁρθόδοξος Ἐνστασις καὶ Μαρτυρία*, No 1 (January 2000), pp. 48-50.

Notes

1. See our article “Ἡ κίνησις γιὰ τὸ κοινὸ Πάσχα” [“The Movement for a Common Pascha”], *Ὁρθόδοξος Ἐνημέρωσις*, No. 23 (January-March 1997), p. 83.

2. “Two Easters? Towards a Common Date of Easter,” *Bulletin* of the WCC (7 April 1999).

3. Great Protopresbyter George Tsetsis, *Οἰκουμενικὸς Θρόνος καὶ Οἰκουμένη—Ἐπίσημα Πατριαρχικὰ Κείμενα* [The *Œcumenical Throne and the Oikoumene: Official Patriarchal Texts*] (Katerine: Tertios Publications, 1989), pp. 56, 57, 61, 62.

4. *Πρακτικὰ καὶ Ἀποφάσεις τοῦ ἐν Κωνσταντινουπόλει Πανορθοδόξου Συνεδρίου, 10 Μαΐου-8 Ἰουνίου 1923* [Proceedings and Decisions of the Pan-Orthodox Congress in Constantinople, 10 May-8 June 1923], ed. Dionysios M. Batistatos [Athens: 1982], pp. 13, 14, 56, 57, 72.

5. *Υπόμνημα Περὶ Οἰκουμενισμοῦ* [A Memorandum Concerning Ecumenism], published by the periodical *Παρακαταθήκη* (Thessaloniki: 1999), 2nd ed., p. 36.

6. Mansi, Vol. XII, col. 1126B; *Πρακτικὰ τῶν Ἁγίων καὶ Οἰκουμενικῶν Συνόδων* [Proceedings of the Holy Œcumenical Synods], ed. Spyridon Melias (Holy Mountain: Kalyve of the Venerable Forerunner Publications, 1981), Vol. II, p. 760b.

7. Source: *Ὁρθόδοξος Ἐνστασις καὶ Μαρτυρία*, No 1 (January 2000), pp. 51-53. This article originally appeared in the Athens newspaper *Καθημερινή* (14 April 1996, p. 7).