

Excerpt from: *Orthodox Christianity and the English Tradition*

8. The Calendar of the Orthodox Church

For many years now there has been much strife throughout the Orthodox Church about the calendar. Let us therefore try to identify the real heart of this controversy.

Since time immemorial man has, as the Psalmist says (Ps. 103, 21 and Ps. 135, 9-10), measured time by the sun and the moon. In this way there came into being solar and lunar calendars. Let us first look at some of the solar calendars:

1) The 'Astronomical' Solar Calendar

The solar calendar is based on the measurement of one year i.e. the time it takes for the Earth to complete one revolution around the Sun. Using contemporary methods this has been established as 365.2419 days, or 365 days 5 hours 48 minutes and 46 seconds (to the nearest second). In a period of 10,000 years there would therefore be 3,652,419 days. If, however, we needed to establish a calendar over a longer period, this figure would be inaccurate. For example in 100,000 years there would be either more or less than 36,524,190 days. Thus we can see that absolute exactness is impossible. Moreover some scientists believe that the Earth does not revolve around the Sun at a constant speed. Some suggest that it is speeding up. It is clear that, for astronomical reasons, which we are unable to alter, all calendars are inexact. It is not possible for us to move the Earth into an orbit around the Sun which would be constant and measure a round number

2) The Julian Calendar

Also called the Church or old calendar. It was adopted by the Church at the First Oecumenical Council in Nicea in 325. It is kept by the Russian, Serbian and Georgian Churches, the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, the Fathers of Mt Athos and Mt Sinai, substantial minorities in Greece, Romania, Bulgaria and in the Diaspora. At present the civil calendar (see below) is 13 days ahead of the Church calendar. This is because the Church calendar measures a year as 365.25 days.

3) The Gregorian Calendar

Also called the new or civil calendar. It was adopted in Rome in 1582 and subsequently by other countries. It is also inaccurate because it measures the year as 365.2425 days. However, it is more astronomically exact than the Julian calendar.

4) The Meletian Calendar

Also called the new or 'corrected Julian' calendar. It was devised by Patriarch Meletios (Metaksakis) of Constantinople and adopted under State pressure by the Church of Greece in 1924. Today it is observed by the Patriarchates of Constantinople, Antioch, Alexandria and the official Churches in Greece, Romania, Bulgaria and Finland as well as in some parts of the Polish, Czechoslovak and American Churches. The difference between this calendar and the Gregorian one is minimal and in fact the two run parallel for the next 800 years. The Meletian calendar is also inexact, being based on a calculation made in 1900, which measured a year as 365.2422 days. Since the difference between the Gregorian and Meletian calendars is at present non-existent, we shall refer to the Meletian calendar henceforth as the Gregorian or new calendar.

Let us now turn our attention to the lunar calendar. This is based on the time the Moon takes to turn around the Earth. This period of time is not constant but varies between approximately 29 days 6 hours and 29 days 20 hours, Using modern techniques astronomers have fixed a mathematical average of 29.530588 days or 29 days 12 hours 44 minutes and approximately 2.8 seconds. This period represents the duration of an average lunar month. 12 lunar months thus represent about 354 days. It is clear that it is therefore very hard to reconcile the solar year with the lunar year. Indeed to do so with mathematical exactness is impossible, except over periods of millions of years.

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In other words there is no common denominator or multiplier between the solar year and the lunar year. And yet to find the date of Easter, it is absolutely essential to harmonise the solar and lunar calendars. What did the Fathers of the Church do when faced with this issue at the First Oecumenical Council at Nicca in 325? How did they overcome this seemingly intractable problem? Before answering these questions, we should perhaps first consider a theological aspect of time.

In the Epistle to the Ephesians (5, 16), we are called to 'redeem time because the days are evil'. These words call us to prayer, because prayer is the only way of making use of time to the full. Time, which by definition is temporary and not eternal, is for ever lost if it is not hallowed i.e. eternalised through contact with the Eternal, the Creator of time. The Church calls us to hallow all things, time included. St. Gregory of Nyssa in his *De Octava*, PG XLIV 609A, talks of time as 'dirty' or 'sullied'. The reason for this is that since the Fall, all Creation is tainted with sin - and therefore time also. The inexactitude of time, the impossibility of measuring time with astronomical accuracy, is a consequence of the Fall, a symbol of imperfection. Therefore, any attempt to 'absolutise' or eternalise time by fixing it in a calendar is illusory. Time is imperfect, sullied and will come to an end in any case. Both time and our inevitably imprecise methods of measuring it are doomed to disappear. To attempt to create a perfect, astronomically exact calendar is to attempt to create something perfect out of something naturally imperfect. We cannot undo the cosmic cataclysm of the Fall by making astronomical measurements or adjustments. It is as if we were to try to perfect man by taking measurements of his body. Realising this, the Church Fathers in 325 showed that there is, however, a way of hallowing, Christianising and purifying time.

One of the tasks of the First Oecumenical Council in 325 was to fix a universal calendar for all Christians. The importance of this task lay in the fact that at that time Christians were celebrating Easter on different dates. Therefore it was essential to establish Paschalia - tables for the dating of Easter - in order to strengthen the unity of the Church and put an end once and for all to disputes and schisms about the calendar. The Fathers decided that there was only one way of doing this - to base the calendar on Christ, and most notably on the most important event in His Life and in the whole history of Creation - the Resurrection. Thus the Fathers looked at the events which in chronological order preceded the Resurrection and determined its date. They are as follows:

- 1) The spring equinox i.e. the moment when on the 21 March the day is as long as the night.
- 2) The first full moon after this equinox (the full moon being the moment when the night sky is illuminated by a maximum of light).
- 3) The first Sunday after this first full moon. Sunday is the third day after the Crucifixion and the first day of the week (Matt. 28, 1). It is the day of the Resurrection, the Lord's Day.

The Fathers also asked the question why Christ chose to rise from the dead at precisely this time. According to the Gospels, the Saviour chose His time, often fleeing from the Jews, but finally accepting death with the words, 'the hour has now come' (John 12, 23 and 17, 1 for example). The Fathers explained this by drawing a parallel between the first 'week' of the world (the Six Days of Creation) and the week at the end of which Christ rose from the dead. These two weeks are the most important in the history of the world, and the second one we celebrate liturgically as Great and Holy Week. (For details of this explanation, see the 'Anatolian Homily' on the date of Pascha, written in 387, which portrays what the logic of the Fathers must have been at the First Council).

According to the Fathers the first day of Creation coincided with the spring equinox (Gen. 1, 2-5). The day and the night were equal and the world was created as coming into flower. The fourth day of the Creation was the day of the full moon (Gen. 1, 16). This was the day when the moon was created; it is natural to suppose that it was created as a full moon, i.e. fully illuminated as seen from the Earth, for the inhabitants of which it was created. The creation of man took place on the sixth day (Gen. 1, 26-31). The sixth day, considered to be the day of the Fall, was Friday, the seventh day, the Sabbath, was the day of rest (Gen.2, 2).

In the week of Christ's Crucifixion and Resurrection, the first event is the equinox, the second the full moon, followed by Friday, the sixth day, the anniversary of the Fall, when Christ was crucified for the sins of the world. On the seventh day, the Sabbath, Great and Holy Saturday, Christ rested. On

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the eighth day there occurred the third event, Christ rose from the dead. The eighth day is also the first day of a New Creation. And the first day is the day when the world began (Gen. 1, 3), when God created the Light. Thus Christ, the Lord of Creation, 'by Whom all things were made', becomes the New Adam, 'recreates' man by redeeming him. All that was undone by man through his Fall is made anew in the Re-Creation, the Resurrection of Christ. Together with man, all Creation is renewed. Thus time, also part of Creation and sullied by the Fall, is hallowed, purified and resurrected by the time which the Saviour chose for His saving Passion. The half-light of the equinox is illuminated by the full light of the full moon and then fully lit by the glorious light of the Resurrection, when the sinless human nature of the God-Man was irradiated and transfigured by the Uncreated Light

The problem for the Fathers then was how to imitate the order of the events of the Passion Week, the week in which man was recreated and saved, and guard the theological truths contained in that week, representing them chronologically in the calendar. Practically speaking, how could the solar calendar (according to which the equinox is dated) be combined or harmonized with the lunar calendar (according to which the full moon is dated)? In the Passion Week the sun and the moon had come together to worship the Creator, to bow down before Him, - how could this be expressed in the form of a calendar? As we have already seen, and the Fathers saw long before us, it is impossible to harmonize the two calendars with absolute astronomical accuracy. The Fathers therefore chose to base the calendar not on an imperfect astronomical calendar, but on a perfect theological calendar. Let us look at this more closely.

The Fathers chose to introduce a new calendar into the world - the calendar of the Resurrection, the calendar of the Church, which although linked to astronomical time, the fallen time of the fallen world, is not the same as astronomical time. And it is not the same because it is centred on the time of Christ's Victory over Death, and not on the movements of the stars, planets and satellites of the Fallen Cosmos. By adopting the Julian calendar and a lunar calendar, neither of which was quite accurate, the Fathers managed to harmonize the solar and lunar calendars to the end of time. Accuracy in time for the Fathers was of little import when time itself will end. What was important was the Resurrection of Christ which takes man across time into Eternity - Timelessness. The Fathers showed that, while it is impossible to find harmony in astronomical, i.e. fallen, time, it is possible to find harmony through the Resurrection. Thus, at the First Oecumenical Council, the Church gave harmony to the disharmony of Fallen Creation. For the Church is harmony in a disharmonious universe, hallowing all things by the Holy Ghost, restoring them, transfiguring them into the things of Christ. The new-found harmonization of the solar and lunar calendars represent the harmony between God (the Sun of Truth) and Man (the moon being a symbol of the Mother of God, Who represents the greatest holiness attained by Man). The Church calendar is spiritual harmony restored to the universe by the Resurrection of Christ, which is also the Resurrection of Man and the whole Cosmos.

In sixteenth century Rome, however, none of this theological depth was understood. This was because the criteria of thought at the time were not Christian but humanist, worshipping not Christ, but fallen man, with his fallen reason and its fallible understanding of the world around it. In 1582 Pope Gregory XIII agreed to change the calendar that had been universally observed more or less since the First Council for a new calendar, one which would be astronomically more correct. Having introduced this calendar, the dating of Easter, the Paschalia, would also be affected. This change led to disharmony between the solar and lunar calendars and the loss therefore of all the dogmatic and theological harmony and symbolism of the Julian calendar and its associated Paschalia.

Indeed, as the Orthodox Church in the sixteenth century saw, the new Gregorian calendar and Paschalia are anticanonical. A number of canons (The Apostolic Canons VII and LXX; Laodicea XXXVII and XXXIX; Antioch I) state quite clearly that the Christian Easter must neither coincide with or fall before the Jewish Passover. These ancient canons had been established to preserve the historical and therefore theological order of events of the Passion of Christ. It would be senseless to celebrate Easter before the Jewish Passover, for Christ is precisely 'the New Passover'. The new calendar of Rome was thus condemned and anathematized by the Orthodox Church almost as soon as it was introduced in 1583, 1587 and 1593 at councils of the Four Eastern Patriarchs and

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representatives of the other local Orthodox Churches. This condemnation was upheld by all Orthodox until the beginning of our own century, until after the Fall of the Russian Empire. Indeed even Patriarch Meletios did not dare introduce the Gregorian calendar into the Orthodox Church, given the awful anathemas of the Patriarchs; instead he resorted to a piece of most un-Orthodox casuistry, with the 'Meletian calendar', which is not the Gregorian in theory, but in practice runs parallel for the first 800 years.

In parentheses it is interesting to note that the calendar change of Pope Gregory was not the first one. As early as 1324 certain Greeks, influenced by the same rationalistic, pagan philosophy as the humanists of sixteenth-century Renaissance Italy had already attempted to change the calendar. And at that time too the Church had rejected any change, putting Theology above Astronomy. (For details see *The Calendar Question* by Fr Basil Sakkas, pp. 23-27).

A recent Russian study of the calendar by A. N. Zelinsky confirms that between 1851 and 1950, for example, Roman Catholics and Protestants celebrated Easter no fewer than 15 times before the Jews celebrated their Passover. This is clearly anticanonical. Unfortunately the Orthodox Church in Finland and a few parishes of the Russian Orthodox Patriarchal Church in Holland also celebrate Easter according to the new calendar and associated Paschalia. In Finland this innovation was responsible for the virtual destruction there of monastic life. Monks, refusing to live in conflict with the canons, fled the country.

Another problem exists for those who, like the Greek Church, retain the Church calendar for Easter but have introduced the new calendar for feasts with a fixed date. Firstly they celebrate these fixed feasts at a different time from the majority of Orthodox, not to mention from the dates kept by countless generations of their forebears and the saints now in Heaven. Secondly, when fixed feasts coincide with feasts whose date is determined by the date of Easter, chaos and absurdity ensue. Let us take the case of the Fast and the Feast of the Holy Apostles. For example, in 1983 Easter fell on April 25 (May 8 in the new calendar) and thus the Fast of the Holy Apostles (which starts every year 58 days after Easter) began on June 21 (July 4 in the new calendar). The Feast of the Holy Apostles, however, fell according to the new calendar on June 29. Thus the Fast in preparation for the Feast began 5 days after the Feast! Such absurdity causes regular embarrassment and ridicule. Worse than this, the new calendar churches seem to dishonour the two greatest Apostles of Christendom.

There is also yet another problem for the local churches that have adopted the new calendar for the fixed feasts. This is schism, particularly serious in Greece and Romania. Those who have wished to observe the old calendar have been and still are directly or indirectly persecuted. With calendar schisms these churches have been undermined and unable to offer the resistance that they might well have been able to offer to the secular-minded governments of their countries. Such governments have of course taken advantage of these splits to further weaken the churches and secularise the country. In Poland and North America, the local churches have permitted some parishes to retain the church calendar, while others follow the new. There are even some parishes which have both calendars at the same time! The results everywhere are chaos, confusion, discord and disharmony - which was precisely the situation before the First Oecumenical Council and one of the main reasons why that Council was called.

Nevertheless, at the present time, a number of arguments are put forward in favour of the new calendar and its associated dating of Easter:

- 1) All Christians should celebrate their feasts at the same time.

In answer to this, it may be asked what is the most important thing - the unity of Orthodox with Non-Orthodox, or the unity of Orthodox with one another and their hundreds of millions of ancestors in the Church Triumphant?

- 2) For Orthodox Christians living in states that have fixed public holidays according to the new calendar, it is easier and much more convenient for them to celebrate feasts according to that calendar.

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In reply it may be said that an Orthodox Christian must decide what is more important: to live in convenience and psychological comfort conforming himself to the others around him or to live in accordance with the ordinances and traditions of the Church of Christ? Ultimately, whatever the concessions we may make on secondary questions, we have to accept the Church with all the discomforts. Do we live according to the ascetic path of the Cross or according to the world? The Cross of Christ has always been a stumbling-block to 'Greeks', as St. Paul called those who put rationalism above Love. And where do we see the greater piety and church-going - among those who live according to the new calendar or among those who have remained faithful to the Church calendar? It cannot be denied that many who wish to change to the new calendar are motivated only by worldly reasons, an inferiority complex before the world, a wish to become like 'the others', a wish to integrate secular establishments. If we follow such logic, then it would lead us to abandon Orthodox Christianity altogether. Orthodox living in Muslim countries should become Muslim, in Roman Catholic countries Roman Catholic, in Protestant ones Protestant. The logical conclusion of such an argument is, in a word, apostasy. Whatever concessions on the calendar question may be made in exceptional circumstances out of pastoral economy, we must remember that these are but concessions to our weakness. We must not attempt to justify them. For this is the path of apostasy.

- 3) It is absurd to continue to live according to a calendar that everyone admits to be astronomically wrong. We live in the 20th century and we can no longer keep this unscientific anachronism.

In answer - do we then live according to science which, with all its fads and fashions, is merely a constantly fluctuating attempt to define the laws of the fallen world with our fallible and fallen reasons? Do we not rather live according to Theology, the teaching and life of the Church, revealed through Her by the Holy Ghost? (Or is it that many prefer science to the Church because, apart from the outward, human aspect of the Church, they do not know Her, as our Mother?). Given that an absolutely accurate calendar is in any case impossible, we must choose between a theologically harmonious calendar, canonical though astronomically inexact, and on the other hand, a calendar which is theologically disharmonious, uncanonical, unhistorical, anathematised but astronomically less inexact, which since its introduction has caused untold strife and schism. Which should we choose?

- 4) If we continue to observe the Church calendar, then eventually we shall find ourselves celebrating Easter in the autumn and Christmas in the summer.

In answer - no feast has to fall in a particular season. To say otherwise is either folklore or else nature-worship. Indeed Orthodox in the southern hemisphere already celebrate Easter in the autumn and Christmas in the summer. They do not seem to suffer from it. In any case it would take some 20,000 years for this to happen in the northern hemisphere - and then those in the southern hemisphere would have Easter in the spring and Christmas in the winter.

- 5) To adhere to a certain calendar is a sign of judaizing ritualism, from which Christ freed us. The calendar can have no importance for our salvation, what is important is love for others.

Of course what is essential is the cultivation of love in accordance with the Gospel commandments. This is possible through the Church and our obedience to Her. For if we are not obedient to the Church, the Body of Christ, how can we be obedient to Christ and the Gospel? If we disobey the Church, then in some way we separate ourselves from Her, everyone making for himself his own 'church'. The only thing that has any absolute significance is our faithfulness to Christ and the Church that is His Body and therefore our Mother. This faithfulness is witnessed to in our faithfulness to the ordinances of the Church, whose authority is the Holy Ghost Who speaks through the saints to us. If we disobey this authority, then the Church is rent by splits and schisms with groups breaking away from Her.

As regards the calendar for example, if the whole Church met in a Council, blessed and hallowed by the Holy Ghost and saintly Fathers, and took a decision to change the calendar, then it would be wrong to disobey. In the history of the Orthodox Church, we have an excellent example of this in the case of the Russian Old Ritualists. They refused to give up certain rites peculiar to the local Russian

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Orthodox Church in favour of other rites observed by the rest of the Orthodox Church. The Russian Church as a whole had decided to adopt these other rites in order to strengthen the bonds of catholic unity in the Church; the Old Ritualists rejected this conciliar decision of the Church and thus formed a sect. The error of the Old Ritualists was not their wish to conserve their rites, but to disobey the Church. Indeed, in the nineteenth century some Old Ritualists returned to the Church, but kept their old rites. The sole thing that is important is the unity of the Church in the Faith.

The catholicity of the Church is upheld in numerous writings: 'Hold fast the traditions which ye have received' (2 Thess. 2, 15); 'Guard the deposit' (1 Tim. 6, 20); in the canons (Seventh Oecumenical Council, Canon VII; St Basil the Great, Canons LXXXXII and LXXXXIII; Apostolic Canons XXXI) any tradition or teaching of the Church must be preserved, if it is of the Holy Ghost. We must fight to preserve the catholic unity of the Church. As the steward in the Gospels (Luke, 16, 1-13), we shall surely be judged according to our faithfulness to the Church. And if we are not faithful in such matters as the calendar, how can we be faithful in the great things? Love cannot be obtained without obedience, and obedience is obtained by renouncing our own wills, a hard and difficult path, the saints tell us, composed of ascetic struggles and privations. It is an unfortunate fact that those who wish to introduce the new calendar also wish to introduce other innovations, in disobedience to the age-old practices and traditions of the Church. Some have remarked that, so far, there have been no saints in the new calendar.

When we see the spiritual confusion and the schisms sown in the Church because of the introduction of the new calendar, perhaps we recall Esau (Gen. 25, 29-34), who exchanged his birthright for a mess of pottage. Surely the Orthodox birthright is the theological, dogmatic and symbolic beauty of the Church calendar? Surely we should keep this spiritual heritage, the spiritual heritage of both East and West, from the dark forces and powerbrokers of this world. Should we not be thankful that we have managed to keep the church calendar, which signifies our obedience to the Church, which is in the world, but not of it? Is it not rather the world that in recent times has become out of step with the Church, turning to worship the stars and not the Maker of the stars? As Orthodox Christians, we must decide what we praise more, our own fallible attempts to measure the movements of 'the sun, moon and all the stars of light' (Ps. 148, 3), or the God-Man Who rose from the dead, giving the Resurrection unto Life to all those who are faithful to Him. Do we then value fallible human reason more than the Word of God? Do we respect Astronomy more than Theology, the temporary more than the Eternal? Ultimately - which do we worship - the Creator or the Creation? - This is what we must decide and our decision will be reflected in our attitude to the calendar.

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