

On the Date of Pascha (Our Lord's Resurrection)

At the First Ecumenical (*world-wide*) Council at Nicea (325), the decree went out that all the churches celebrate the Feast of our Lord's Resurrection on the same day. "Our Savior has left us only one festal day of our redemption, that is to say, of His holy passion, and He desired to establish only one Catholic Church. Think, then, how unseemly it is that on the same day some should be fasting (i.e., still keeping Lent) while others are seated at a banquet (i.e., celebrating Pascha); and that after Pascha, some should be rejoicing at feasts, while others are still observing a strict fast. For this reason, a Divine Providence wills that this custom should be rectified and regulated in a uniform way." (from the *Letter of the Emperor Constantine* to all those not present at the Council of Nicea)

Prior to this Council at Nicea (325), some churches celebrated Pascha on the date of the Jewish Passover – the 14th day of Nisan according to the Jewish lunar calendar [by definition *a full moon*], while others kept Pascha on a Sunday, the day of the Lord's resurrection. The church at Rome calculated the date of Pascha based on the vernal equinox (the first day of Spring) being March 18; the church at Alexandria, Egypt, calculated the date of Pascha based on the equinox being March 21. The church at Rome differed from the Greek practice in that if the full moon fell on a Saturday, the church at Rome would not keep Pascha the next day but the Sunday a week later.

Despite the decree of the Council of Nicea (325), differences on the date and keeping of Pascha persisted well over a hundred years centering on the issue of the yearly fixing of the date of the Jewish Passover, ideally the first full moon after the first day of Spring (i.e., the vernal equinox). As we know, this date varies from year to year because the solar and lunar calendars do not perfectly harmonize. Due to Jewish computations of their Passover, it also became possible for that feast to occur *before* the vernal equinox resulting in *two* Passovers within the same calendar year beginning on the first day of Spring.

The general rule for the date of Pascha is as follows: *it is the first Sunday, after the first full moon, after the vernal equinox (i.e., the first day of Spring)* – and Pascha cannot coincide with the Jewish Passover, because Christ is the fulfillment of the Jewish Passover, not the perpetuator of the old covenant. [The word *Pascha* is simply the Hebrew word *Pesach* – meaning "Passover" – rendered in Greek and then English letters. "For indeed Christ, our Passover (lit., *Pascha*), was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast..." (1 Cor. 5:7, 8). From a Christian perspective, it is illogical to keep the feast of the Lord's Resurrection – Pascha – with or before the Jewish Passover, Christ being its ultimate fulfillment.]

So why does the date of Orthodox Pascha usually differ from the date of "western" Easter, if we all supposedly follow the same formula for the dating of the

Feast of feasts? The answer to this question depends on the calendars the churches follow. For purposes of dating Pascha, the Orthodox churches still follow the Julian Calendar (the *Old* Calendar, known as Old Style – O.S.); the “western” churches dependent on the calendar reform of the Roman papacy follow the Gregorian Calendar (the *New* Calendar, known as New Style – N.S.). Currently the Gregorian Calendar, introduced in 1582, is 13 days ahead of the Julian Calendar adopted in 45 B.C., which because of slight inaccuracy in adding leap days “gained” one day every 128 years. According to the Julian Calendar (O.S.), the vernal equinox occurs on April 2/3; according to the Gregorian Calendar (N.S.), the vernal equinox is March 21/22.

Thus Orthodox Pascha can never occur before April 2, whereas “western” Easter can occur any day after March 21. Furthermore using the Gregorian Calendar, “western” Easter can occur on the same day as, or before, the Jewish Passover, something prohibited in the ancient Church after the adoption of a common date of celebration at the First Ecumenical Council. See the comparison of dates below (italicized and bold-typed dates within the highlighted year indicating when “western” Easter occurs on or before the Jewish Passover):

<u>Year</u>	<u>Jewish Passover</u>	<u>Western Easter</u>	<u>Orthodox Pascha</u>
2004	April 6	April 11	April 11
2005	April 24	March 27	May 1
2006	April 13	April 16	April 23
2007	April 3	April 8	April 8
2008	April 20	March 23	April 27
2009	April 9	April 12	April 19
2010	March 30	April 4	April 4
2011	April 19	April 24	April 24
2012	April 7	April 8	April 15
2013	March 26	March 31	May 5
2014	April 15	April 20	April 20
2015	April 4	April 5	April 12

While the Gregorian Calendar may be more astronomically accurate, its wholesale adoption pertaining to the calculation of the date of Easter/Pascha leads to certain inconsistencies within the Orthodox Christian Tradition. Hence the Orthodox Church continues to calculate the date of Pascha using the Julian Calendar assuring that the Feast of our Lord’s Resurrection is the crowning celebration of the year, the consummation of the promises of God in the Kingdom of the Risen Christ Jesus.