

Celebrating Easter/Pascha Together
North American Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation
Washington, DC
October 1, 2010

The center of our faith, the center on which all Christians agree, is the kerygma that Jesus is Risen, Jesus is Lord:

Having beheld the Resurrection of Christ, let us worship the Holy Lord Jesus, the only Sinless One. We venerate Your Cross, O Christ and we praise and glorify Your Holy Resurrection. You are our God. We know no other than You, and we call upon Your Name. Come, all faithful, let us venerate the holy Resurrection of Christ for behold, through the Cross, joy has come to all the world. --Matins of the Resurrection

Despite this agreement Catholics and Orthodox in fact celebrate Easter on different days, fracturing the proclamation of this Good News of the Resurrection.

The consequences of our division on this issue are significant. Interchurch families find themselves in conflict observing two Lenten cycles and two Paschal dates. The world looks on as Christians speak through their celebration with a divided voice. Many are impeded from hearing the Good News of the Resurrection by the scandal of this division.

In 2010, Eastern and Western Church Calendars coincided so that all Christians celebrated the Feast of the Resurrection on the same day. The dates for the Holy Day will coincide again in 2011, but will vary again after that. As we remember the joys of a common date this year, 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.

We, the members of the North American Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation, urgently join our voices to those of many others calling for leadership to agree on a continued, unified determination for the celebration of the Resurrection. As Melkite Patriarch Gregorios III of Antioch has said of the Paschal date in the context of the Christian witness in the Middle East, "Is it permissible to turn a deaf ear to the voice of our sons and daughters? Today more than ever, we need to recognize the signs of the times, the outstanding initiatives to which our people aspire, a thirst for Christian unity and for making progress in realizing it, whatever the measures, great or small, needful to bring it about."

We echo the recent calls of our own Consultation in 1998 and many others to close this wound once and for all: the Inter-Orthodox Theological Consultation (1971), the Pan-Orthodox Conference in Chambesy (1977), the Orthodox Theological Society of America (1992), The Aleppo Consultation (1997), the Lambeth Conference, the Lutheran World Federation, and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (shortly after 1997), the United States Orthodox-Lutheran Dialogue (2000), The Orthodox Church of Finland (2001), the International Seminar at the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv (2009), the National Council of Churches in the USA (2010), the Melkite Patriarch Gregorios III (2010), and others.

The First Council of Nicaea (325), touchstone of Christian theology through the ages, was gathered largely to resolve two major questions: the Arian controversy and the date of Easter—so consequential were those two issues for the unity and life of the Church.

Our Consultation reaffirms the decision of the Council of Nicaea to celebrate the Paschal Feast on the first Sunday following the first full moon after the Spring Equinox.

As we said in response to the Aleppo Statement of 1997:

The Council of Nicaea was willing to make use of contemporary science to calculate the date of Easter/Pascha. We believe that this principle still holds valid today. Scientific observations about the cosmos reveal the goodness and wonder of God's creation, which he embraced in the incarnation of his Son. Moreover, to deny an observable truth about the world is to reject God's gift to us. As they witness to God's love for the world, our churches need to use the findings of contemporary science as did the Fathers of Nicaea.

The key today to resolving the issue in accordance with the mandate of Nicaea is to determine the Equinox from the meridian of Jerusalem (Longitude 35° 13'47.1) using the most accurate scientific instruments and astronomical data available. This will resolve the conflict in our liturgical observance by aligning existing Church calendars to the Nicene formula-- not just the calendar from one set of Churches, but from both Eastern and Western traditions. As disciples of the Risen Lord who all profess adherence to the mandate of the Council of Nicaea, we find a profound need to adhere to Nicaea's formulae, and to calculate the yearly date accurately. As Churches whose faith is rooted in Scripture and Tradition, let us ensure we stay rooted in The One Who is Truth.

This method to resolve the problem according to Nicaea has already been supported at the Aleppo Consultation of 1997 by representatives of the World Council of Churches and of the Middle East Council of Churches (both of which Councils were the sponsors of the Aleppo Consultation). It was also supported by representatives of the Catholic Church, of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and of many Christian communities.ⁱ

In 1998, our own consultation made several points in support of Aleppo's recourse to Nicaea, including:

The Aleppo Statement accurately presents historical circumstances relating to such matters as the Council of Nicaea's treatment of the relationship between the Christian Pascha and the Jewish Passover. The practice of continuing to celebrate Pascha according to the ancient Julian calendar has often been defended, by some Eastern Christians, as resting on a decision associated with that council prohibiting the churches from celebrating the Paschal feast "with the Jews." As scholars of both our traditions have very clearly demonstrated, this prohibition was directed against making the calculation of the date of Easter depend upon contemporary Jewish reckoning, not against a coincidence of date between the two festivals. In fact, a coincidence of Passover and Easter dates continued to occur from time to time as late as the 8th century. Only later, when the increasing "lag" of the Julian Calendar made any coincidence impossible, did the

prohibition come to be misinterpreted as meaning that the Jewish Passover must necessarily precede the Christian Passover each year.

The need for such unity is great, for our world has changed drastically since the Aleppo Statement was published in 1997. We have witnessed the growth of secularism and the global effects of tyranny and war. More than ever, there is a need for a unified Christian proclamation and a witness of the core of our common faith: the Resurrection of Our Lord.

Time is of the essence. In the short term, the Easter dates will coincide again in 2011, 2014, and 2017. Then seventeen years will pass before a unified Pascha is celebrated in 2034.

There is great need for careful education and pastoral sensitivity as we move forward together. We appeal as well to the media of both our churches to take care to report on this issue with accuracy and fairness. We emphasize the hope and joy that a united Easter/Pascha witness will bring the world. There are significant pastoral needs at stake: Can the members of our interchurch families celebrate Easter together? Can we prevent the undesirable possibility of a fixed date recurring every year, which would contravene Nicaea, our biblical theology, and our sacred tradition? 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.

Like the Fathers of Nicaea, our hierarchs are called to be agents of healing to resolve once and for all this ancient dispute in the life of the Church. We, the members of the North American Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation appeal to the Episcopal Assembly of Orthodox Bishops in the U.S.A., to the Episcopal Assembly of Orthodox Bishops in Canada, to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and to the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops to add their voices to press for this change that we feel would benefit all Christians. Enable all of us to proclaim together, with one voice, heart and mind, “Christ is Risen! Indeed He is Risen!”

ⁱ <http://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/faith-and-order-commission/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/towards-a-common-date-for-easter/towards-a-common-date-for-easter.html>