

Common Response to the Aleppo Statement on the Date of Easter/Pascha

1. In March 1997, a consultation jointly sponsored by the World Council of Churches and the Middle East Council of Churches, meeting in Aleppo, Syria, issued a statement "Towards a Common Date for Easter." The North American Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation, meeting in Washington, DC, October 29-31, 1998, studied this Aleppo Statement and reviewed reactions to it thus far. Our Consultation strongly endorses the Aleppo Statement.
2. The Aleppo Statement rightly calls attention to the centrality of Christ's resurrection as the basis of our common faith. As "the ultimate expression of the Father's gift of reconciliation and unity in Christ through the Spirit," the resurrection "is a sign of the unity and reconciliation which God wills for the entire creation" (paragraph 5). Yet by celebrating the feast of Christ's resurrection, the Holy Pascha, or Easter, on different Sundays in the same year, "the churches give a divided witness" to this mystery, "compromising their credibility and effectiveness in bringing the Gospel to the world" (paragraph 1). The question of the date of Easter/Pascha, therefore, is not simply an academic issue, void of pastoral implications. It is a matter of concern in our own North American context. It has become an even more urgent issue in some parts of the world such as the Middle East, where Christians constitute a divided minority in a larger non-Christian society.
3. After reviewing 20th-century discussion of the question of a common date for Easter/Pascha and historical background to present differences of calculation among Christians, the Aleppo Statement recommends:
 - maintaining the norms established by the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea (325 AD), according to which Easter/Pascha should fall on the Sunday following the first full moon of spring, and
 - calculating the necessary astronomical data (spring equinox and full moon) by "the most accurate possible scientific means," using the Jerusalem meridian as the basis for reckoning.
4. Noting that in the year 2001 the Paschal calculations now in use in our churches will coincide, the Aleppo Statement also recommends that, in the interval between now and then, the churches study and consider means to implement these recommendations.
5. Our Catholic-Orthodox Consultation welcomes the Aleppo Statement's recommendations for the following reasons:
 - The Aleppo Statement does well to call attention to the continuing relevance of the Council of Nicaea--a fundamental point of reference for the traditions of both our churches--and in so doing, to reject proposals to establish a fixed date for Easter/Pascha.

- As the Aleppo Statement points out, 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 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.
 - In short, we consider that the implementation of the recommendations of the Aleppo Statement would allow our churches to adhere more exactly to the mode of calculation mandated by the First Council of Nicaea.
6. As the Aleppo Statement indicates, its recommendations will have different implications for our churches "as they seek a renewed faithfulness to Nicaea." For the Eastern churches, "changes in the actual dating of Easter/Pascha will be more perceptible than for the Western churches" (paragraph 13). The fact that the recommendations of the Aleppo Statement substantially repeat proposals already developed by the Orthodox themselves in connection with their preparations for a Great and Holy Council of the Orthodox Church should significantly enhance the Aleppo recommendations' prospects for success. At the same time, as the Aleppo Statement notes, in many of the Eastern churches adherence to their present method of calculation often has been a symbol of the Church's integrity and freedom from the hostile forces of this world. Implementation of the Aleppo recommendations in these circumstances must proceed carefully and with great pastoral sensitivity. The material presented in the Aleppo Statement can be of great help to these churches should they attempt to carry out this effort to be faithful to the great tradition of the Church.
 7. The Aleppo Statement is faithful to the decisions of the First Ecumenical Council regarding the date of Easter/Pascha. At the same time, it takes into account the contemporary situation, which calls for a common witness to the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, the central

mystery of the Christian faith. Our consultation therefore urges our churches to give serious consideration to its recommendations.

Washington, DC
October 31, 1998