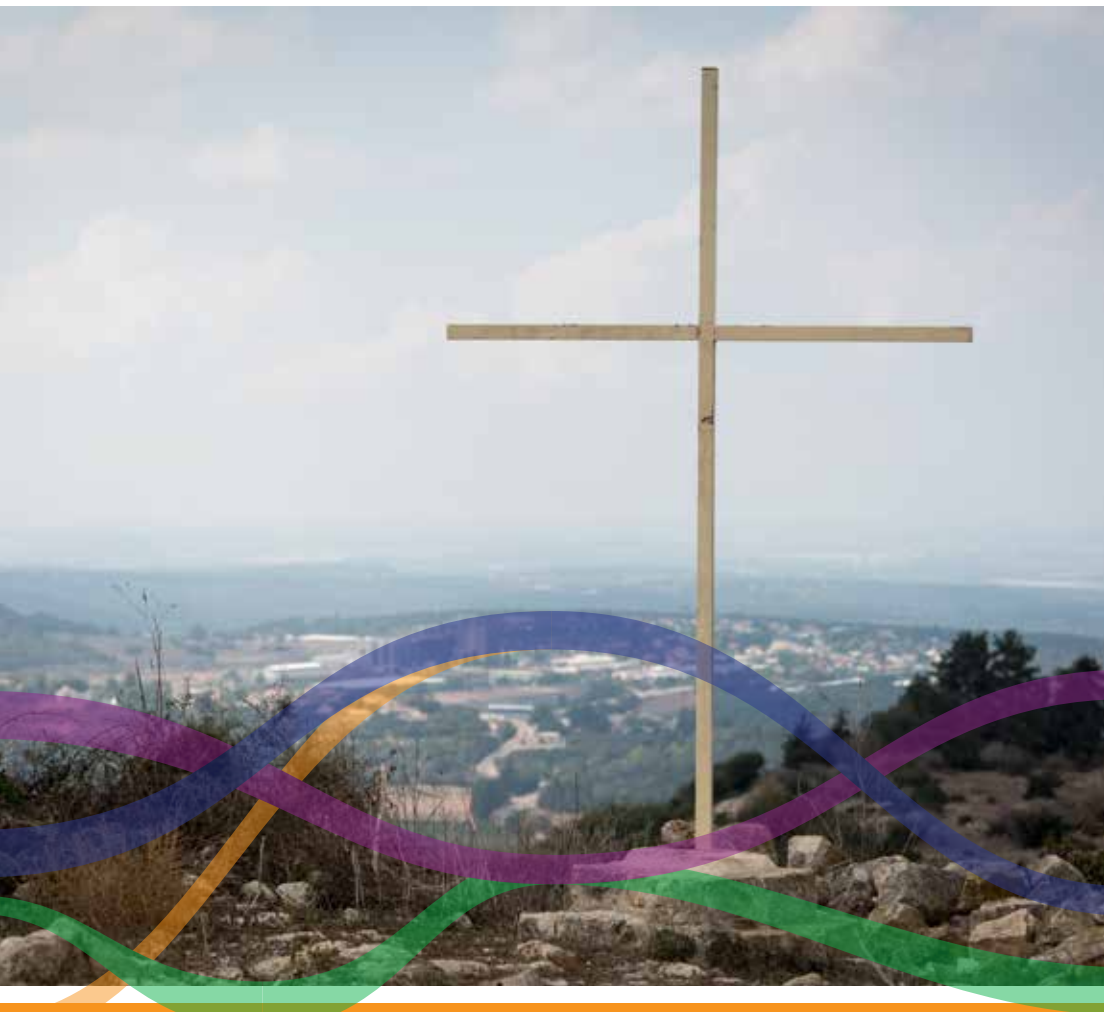


Towards a Common Date for Easter



Faith and Order Paper No. 241



World Council
of Churches

Towards a Common Date for Easter

Faith and Order Paper No. 241

Edited by

Sandra Beardsall and Martin Illert



World Council
of Churches

Towards a Common Date for Easter
Faith and Order Paper No. 241
Edited by Sandra Beardsall and Martin Illert

Rev. Prof. em. Dr Sandra Beardsall is Moderator of the Nicaea 2025 Steering Group of the World Council of Churches.

Rev. Prof. Dr Martin Illert is Programme Executive, Faith and Order Commission, World Council of Churches.

Copyright © 2025 WCC Publications. All rights reserved. This publication may be reproduced in English with full acknowledgment of the source. No part of the publication may be translated without prior written permission from the publisher. Contact: publications@wcc-coe.org.

WCC Publications is the book publishing programme of the World Council of Churches. The WCC is a worldwide fellowship of 352 member churches, which represents more than half a billion Christians around the world. The WCC calls its member churches to seek unity, a common public witness, and service to others in a world where hope and solidarity are the seeds of justice and peace. The WCC works with people of all faiths seeking reconciliation with the goal of justice, peace, and a more equitable world.

Opinions expressed in WCC Publications are those of the authors.

Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, © copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. Used by permission.

Production: Lyn van Rooyen, coordinator, WCC Publications

Cover design: Juliana Schuch

Book design and typesetting: Juliana Schuch

ISBN: 978-2-8254-1884-0

eBook ISBN: 978-2-8254-1885-7

World Council of Churches
150 Route de Ferney, P.O. Box 2100
1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland
www.oikoumene.org

Contents

Introduction	1
Common Celebration of Easter	4
A Perspective from the Coptic Orthodox Tradition	13
The Council of Nicaea and the Date of Easter	13
The Modern Coptic Context	15
Lessons from Early and Medieval Church History	16
Recommendations	17
A Roman Catholic Perspective	19
The Council of Nicaea on the Date of Easter	19
Current Practice in the Roman Catholic Church	20
Official Statements from Roman Catholic Side	20
What Needs to Be Considered and What Needs to Be Done	21
In Conclusion: A Concrete Proposal	22
A Lutheran Perspective	23
The Adoption of the Gregorian Calendar in Protestant Europe	23
The Finnish Context: Already Celebrating Easter Together	24
Summary of the Webinar Discussion	27
“Please help to make the common date for Easter a reality”	27
“Why did the Holy and Great and Council of the Orthodox Church in 2016 not address the question of Easter?”	27
“Should we not amend our language around not celebrating Easter when Jewish people celebrate Passover?”	28
Concluding Remarks	28
The Aleppo Proposal for a Common Date for Easter	29
Towards a Common Date for Easter	33
I. The Issues	33
II. Two Recommendations	38
Participants	41
Table of Easter/Pascha dates, 2001–2025	43
Literature	45

Introduction

Rev. Prof. Dr Sandra Beardsall

The feast of the resurrection lies at the heart of Christian faith. But finding a common date for that celebration has always been a complex matter. One must consider lunar and solar cycles, differing calendars, the relationship of Jesus' death and resurrection to the Jewish Passover feast, and the churches' long-held traditions. The bishops at the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE considered the issue resolved, but subsequent calendars and processes for calculating the date resulted in Christians again celebrating Easter on differing dates.

In the 20th century, Christians, especially in the East, began to give fresh attention to finding a common date for Easter. The Second Vatican Council took up the issue, and the World Council of Churches (WCC) began to discuss the topic beginning in the 1960s. The churches of the Middle East showed particular interest in confronting what they understood to be not simply an anomaly but a painful and damaging Christian division. Their concern led to a consultation of interested parties, jointly sponsored by the WCC and the Middle East Council of Churches, which took place in Aleppo, Syria, in 1997. Within "an atmosphere of prayer and common study," the participants viewed the issue from various perspectives: "theological, historical, liturgical, catechetical, and pastoral."¹ The document the consultation produced, "Towards a Common Date for Easter" (often called the Aleppo statement), offered observations and specific recommendations for the churches.

The stated goal of the consultation participants was that the churches, through ongoing study and reflection on the subject of determining the date of Easter, might find a path to that common ground by 2001, when the dates of Easter in both Eastern and Western calendars would coincide. However, for various reasons, those processes have yet to be completed and bear fruit. Further, the Aleppo statement itself somehow failed to find its way to the Faith and Order digital document library, and the renewed quest seemed to fade from view.

Still, the desire, and even need, to work toward a common Easter date persists among the churches. The Nicaea 1700th anniversary year, when all Christians will once again celebrate Easter on a common day, offers fresh impetus to explore this hope. WCC General Secretary Jerry Pillay noted, "It is with gratitude and great joy that we have listened to the voices of Church

1. "Towards a Common Date for Easter," World Council of Churches / Middle East Council of Churches Consultation, Aleppo, Syria, 5–10 March 1997, WCC website, 10 March 1997, par. 4, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/towards-a-common-date-for-easter>.

leaders and theologians calling for a common date for Easter as a sign of Christian unity,” while continuing to respect all churches in their traditions and ways.² In other words, as the Aleppo consultation acknowledged 28 years ago, behind the technical challenges to finding a common Easter date lie important theological and pastoral considerations, all of which must be considered. But these should not thwart the task.

To help give shape to this desire to revive the discussion and search for possibilities, the Commission on Faith and Order held a well-attended global webinar on 13 February 2025: “Easter 2025: Celebrating Together to Strengthen Unity.” Attended by persons from every continent, ranging from interested laypersons to church leaders and scholars, the webinar invited panelists from four traditions to offer their perspectives on the search for a way to celebrate Easter on a common date every year. After a short statement from Faith and Order Youth Commissioner Mawuli Assimadi, of the Presbyterian Church of Togo, on the significance of this task for the churches today, the panelists examined the question from their respective contexts. The presenters were the following:

- His Eminence Metropolitan Prof. Dr Job (Getcha), Metropolitan of Pisidia in the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, who spoke on the historical context of the Easter date
- Fr Prof. Dr Arsenius Mikhail, of St Athanasius and St Cyril Coptic Orthodox School in Newport Beach, California, USA, who offered a Coptic Orthodox perspective
- Dr Johannes Oeldemann, of the Johann-Adam-Möhler-Institut für Ökumenik, in Paderborn, Germany, who offered a Roman Catholic perspective
- Rev. Dr Tomi Karttunen, Executive Secretary for Ecumenical Relations and Theology at the Lutheran Church of Finland, who offered a Lutheran perspective.

The contributions of the four panelists were rich and diverse. Each one, from differing angles, nonetheless glimpsed both possibility and hope for the churches to move toward a common Easter date. The Commission on Faith and Order determined that the four papers should be published, along with a summary of comments from the webinar discussion, as a Faith and Order

2. Quoted by M. Chiara Biagioni, “Ogni decisione deve includere tutti, non può essere motivo di divisione” [Common Easter. Pillay (WCC): “Every decision must include everyone, it cannot be a reason for division”], in *Società per l’Informazione Religiosa (SIR)*, 1 February 2025, <https://www.agensir.it/chiesa/2025/02/01/pasqua-comune-pillay-wcc-ogni-decisione-deve-includere-tutti-non-puo-essere-motivo-di-divisione/>. English translation by author.

paper. To complement these fresh insights, this publication brings the Aleppo statement back into public view by including it, along with an introduction by the Rev. Dr Dagmar Heller, a former member of the Faith and Order secretariat who participated in the Aleppo consultation. Finally, this volume includes a collection of resources and web links that help to deepen our knowledge and awareness.

We hope these offerings—which include historical depth, rich reflection, and exciting practical suggestions—may help animate the churches of the world and Christians in their own contexts to work with one another toward a common celebration of Easter. For we could then give visible witness to that mystery of faith that truly unites us, that refuses to give the last word to despair, and that invigorates us anew to pursue life for all in the world God so loves.

Common Celebration of Easter

Metropolitan Job of Pisidia

St Athanasius of Alexandria, one of the witnesses of the Council of Nicaea, wrote that the Council of Nicaea was held to resolve the Arian conflict and also the question of the common date of Easter.³ He mentioned that the problem at that time was that some Christians in Syria, Cilicia, and Mesopotamia were celebrating Easter together with the Jews.⁴

In his encyclical letter after the Council of Nicaea, the emperor Constantine, who had convened the Council, wrote: “It is vexing to hear the Jews boast that without them, the Christians would not be able to observe Easter.”⁵ So it seems that the Council of Nicaea not only found a way to have a common celebration of all Christians together but also found a way for the Christians to determine the date of Easter autonomously, not dependent on the Jewish calculation.

Another text, taken from the Apostolic Constitutions, which were compiled in Antioch at the end of the 4th Century—therefore after the Council of Nicaea—notes that *Pascha* (that is, Easter) should be determined according to the spring equinox with care and precision and not rely on the calculation of Jews which was already erroneous at that time:

Therefore, brothers, you who have been redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, ought to keep the days of the Passover after the equinox with great care and precision, so as not to commemorate twice a year the one Passion, but once a year the one who died but once, and not to take care to keep the feast with the Jews. For now there is nothing in common between you and them; for they have also erred in the very calculation that they are accustomed to make, and are now led astray on every side and separated from the truth. But you, hold with precision to the vernal equinox, which is on the twenty-second day of the twelfth month, that is, Dystros; count accurately the twenty-first day of the moon, so that the fourteenth day of the moon does not fall in another week and that because of an

3. Athanasius of Alexandria, Letter to the African Bishops, in *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 26, col. 1032 C-D. See also on the issue of Easter: Metropolitan Job (Getcha), The Actuality of the Council of Nicaea, *The Ecumenical Review* 75, 2, 2023, p. 185-202, esp. p. 194-197.

4. Athanasius of Alexandria, Letter to the African Bishops.

5. Letter of Emperor Constantine on the Council of Nicaea, *Vita Constantini*, III, 17-20 (Eusèbe de Césarée, *Vie de Constantin*, Texte critique par F. Winkelmann GCS, Introductions et notes par Luce Pietri. Traduction par Marie-Josèphe Rondeau, Sources Chrétiennes 559, édition du Cerf: Paris 2013, p. 373-381).

error we do not celebrate Easter twice in the same year through ignorance, or that we do not celebrate the day of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ on a day other than Sunday.⁶

Thus, the celebration of Easter should always be on a Sunday.⁷

What we can see from these texts is that the council of Nicaea determined to celebrate Easter on the first Sunday following the first full moon after the spring equinox. So why is there such an emphasis on the moon? Because the Jewish Passover was celebrated during the full moon of spring. But, interestingly, the reference was neither to a precise calendar nor to the date of a feast of a specific religion but to astronomic phenomena, the spring, the full moon, and the Sunday. The Orthodox Church follows this calculation, but to determine the date of Pascha, the Orthodox Church, until today, uses the Julian calendar.

According to the Julian calendar, the spring equinox fell on 22 March during the Council of Nicaea, which corresponds to 4 April in the Gregorian calendar. This means that until today, Easter is never celebrated before the 4th of April. Also, the full moon used to determine the date of Easter in the Orthodox Church is not the full moon you see in the sky but the date prescribed according to old tables, called *Paschalion*.

On the following two pages you have a table with all the possible and imaginable dates when Easter could fall during a year. One calculates the year according to a byzantine calculation from the beginning of the creation. In other words, you have to add 5,508 years to the current year, so this year, 2025, is the year 7,533. Then, you have to divide this number by 19 to determine the lunar cycle, based on the number remaining, and by 28 for the relevant number in the 28-year solar cycle, based on the number remaining:

$$7534 \div 19 = 396 \text{ Remains } \mathbf{9}$$

$$7534 \div 28 = 269 \text{ Remains } \mathbf{1}$$

Then, in the table, if you go to line 9 and column 1, you will find the date of Easter is 7 April 7,533 (Julian calendar), corresponding to 20 April 2025 in the Gregorian calendar.⁸

6. Apostolic Constitutions V, 17 (Constitutions Apostoliques, ed. Marcel Metzger, Sources Chrétiennes 329, édition du Cerf: Paris 1986, p. 267-269).

7. Apostolic Constitutions V, 17, p. 267-269.

8. See #WCC Webinar: Easter 2025: Celebrating together to strengthen unity: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvQvguCw858> at 11:25. (13.03.2025).

ΚΑΝΟΝΙΟΝ ΑΙΩΝΙΟΝ				
Χρυσός Αριθμός (Τάξη Κύκλων Σελήνης)	Σελήνης Θεμέλιον (Επακτή)	Νομικόν Φάσκα (Εαρινή Πανσέληνος)		
			1, 7, 12, 18	2, 13, 19, 24
1	14	2 Απριλίου	7 Απριλίου	6 Απριλίου
2	25	22 Μαρτίου	24 Μαρτίου	23 Μαρτίου
3	6	10 Απριλίου	14 Απριλίου	13 Απριλίου
4	17	30 Μαρτίου	31 Μαρτίου	6 Απριλίου
5	28	18 Απριλίου	21 Απριλίου	20 Απριλίου
6	9	7 Απριλίου	14 Απριλίου	13 Απριλίου
7	20	27 Μαρτίου	31 Μαρτίου	30 Μαρτίου
8	1	15 Απριλίου	21 Απριλίου	20 Απριλίου
9	12	4 Απριλίου	7 Απριλίου	6 Απριλίου
10	23	24 Μαρτίου	31 Μαρτίου	30 Μαρτίου
11	4	12 Απριλίου	14 Απριλίου	13 Απριλίου
12	15	1 Απριλίου	7 Απριλίου	6 Απριλίου
13	26	21 Μαρτίου	24 Μαρτίου	23 Μαρτίου
14	7	9 Απριλίου	14 Απριλίου	13 Απριλίου
15	18	29 Μαρτίου	31 Μαρτίου	30 Μαρτίου
16	29	17 Απριλίου	21 Απριλίου	20 Απριλίου
17	11	5 Απριλίου	7 Απριλίου	6 Απριλίου
18	22	25 Μαρτίου	31 Μαρτίου	30 Μαρτίου
19	3	13 Απριλίου	14 Απριλίου	20 Απριλίου

Christians in the West usually use an updated calculation nowadays. We know today that the spring equinox is not on 22 March anymore. It falls on 20 March. Then, this year, the full moon falls on Sunday, 13 April and the first Sunday following that full moon is on 20 April, which is the same result as the very complicated table that I explained before. This explains why, this year, by accident, all the Christians celebrate Easter on the same date.

But next year, it will not be the case because if you do all these complicated calculations and look in these old tables, you will find that Easter will fall on 30 March according to the Julian Calendar, which corresponds to 12 April

Τάξεις Κύκλων Ηλίου

3, 8, 14, 25	9, 15, 20, 26	4, 10, 21, 27	5, 11, 16, 22	6, 17, 23, 28
5 Απριλίου	4 Απριλίου	3 Απριλίου	9 Απριλίου	8 Απριλίου
29 Μαρτίου	28 Μαρτίου	27 Μαρτίου	26 Μαρτίου	25 Μαρτίου
12 Απριλίου	11 Απριλίου	17 Απριλίου	16 Απριλίου	15 Απριλίου
5 Απριλίου	4 Απριλίου	3 Απριλίου	2 Απριλίου	1 Απριλίου
19 Απριλίου	25 Απριλίου	24 Απριλίου	23 Απριλίου	22 Απριλίου
12 Απριλίου	11 Απριλίου	10 Απριλίου	9 Απριλίου	8 Απριλίου
29 Μαρτίου	28 Μαρτίου	3 Απριλίου	2 Απριλίου	1 Απριλίου
19 Απριλίου	18 Απριλίου	17 Απριλίου	16 Απριλίου	22 Απριλίου
5 Απριλίου	11 Απριλίου	10 Απριλίου	9 Απριλίου	8 Απριλίου
29 Μαρτίου	28 Μαρτίου	27 Μαρτίου	26 Μαρτίου	25 Μαρτίου
19 Απριλίου	18 Απριλίου	17 Απριλίου	16 Απριλίου	15 Απριλίου
5 Απριλίου	4 Απριλίου	3 Απριλίου	2 Απριλίου	8 Απριλίου
22 Μαρτίου	28 Μαρτίου	27 Μαρτίου	26 Μαρτίου	25 Μαρτίου
12 Απριλίου	11 Απριλίου	10 Απριλίου	16 Απριλίου	15 Απριλίου
5 Απριλίου	4 Απριλίου	3 Απριλίου	2 Απριλίου	1 Απριλίου
19 Απριλίου	18 Απριλίου	24 Απριλίου	23 Απριλίου	22 Απριλίου
12 Απριλίου	11 Απριλίου	10 Απριλίου	9 Απριλίου	8 Απριλίου
29 Μαρτίου	28 Μαρτίου	27 Μαρτίου	26 Μαρτίου	1 Απριλίου
19 Απριλίου	18 Απριλίου	17 Απριλίου	16 Απριλίου	15 Απριλίου

according to the Gregorian Calendar. With the astronomic dates you have the result of 5 April, so next year, in 2026, the Orthodox will celebrate Easter one week later. Sometimes, the difference may even be one month, not because of different ways of calculation but because of the data used to calculate the date.

Of course, on the issue of the calendar reform, the Orthodox have long been conscious that there is something wrong with their calendars and that their tables do not reflect the astronomic reality. So, all these issues have been discussed since 1902. In 1902, the Ecumenical Patriarch Joachim III was already speaking about a common date of Easter and using more accurate astronomic

data in an encyclical he sent to all the primates of the Orthodox Churches:

Worthy of no less attention, in our opinion, is the question of a common calendar, already for some time spoken and written about, especially proposed methods of reforming the Julian Calendar, which has prevailed in the Orthodox Church for centuries, or the acceptance of the Gregorian: the former is more defective scientifically, the latter more exact, considering also the change of our ecclesiastical Easter after the necessary agreement. In the studies on this topic, we see that the opinions which are held by Orthodox who have made a special investigation of it are divided. Some of them consider our ancient inheritance as alone fitting in the Church, having been handed down from the fathers and always having had the Church's authority; not only do they think that there is very little need for change, but they would rather avoid it, for the reasons which they elaborate. Others, champions of the Westerners' calendar and its introduction by us, suggest the greatest possible chronometric accuracy, or even the new usage of uniformity; and they advocate the practice of the Western Church as being reasonable, perhaps in expectation of possible religious benefits, in their own opinion. So, in our times, the discussion has been intensified, various and stimulating assertions being propounded by either side, both of a scientific and of a religious nature, on both of which in some Orthodox countries a certain inclination is evident of adherence to the notion of changing our Orthodox calendar or of some reform of it; and, inasmuch as this question (for all its obvious scientific form) has an ecclesiastical importance, it seems right to us to exchange with the other Orthodox Churches the relevant information in order that on this too a common mind might be reached among them, and a single opinion and decision of the whole Orthodox Church expressed. For, to her alone belongs the judgement on this matter and the research (if necessary) for a way of uniting (so far as is possible) the hoped-for scientific accuracy with the desired maintenance of hallowed ecclesiastical decrees.⁹

Then, in 1920, we have the famous encyclical of the Ecumenical Patriarchate addressed to all the Churches of Christ everywhere, which speaks of a

9. Metropolitan Job (Getcha), The Actuality of the Council of Nicaea, *The Ecumenical Review* 75, 2, 2023, p. 195.

common, unified calendar to celebrate the great Christian feasts at the same time by all the churches:

For if the different churches are inspired by love, and place it before everything else in their judgments of others and their relationships with them, instead of increasing and widening the existing dissensions, they should be enabled to reduce and diminish them. By stirring up a right brotherly interest in the condition, the well-being and stability of the other churches; by readiness to take an interest in what is happening in those churches and to obtain a better knowledge of them, and by willingness to offer mutual aid and help, many good things will be achieved for the glory and the benefit both of themselves and of the Christian body. In our opinion, such a friendship and kindly disposition towards each other can be shown and demonstrated particularly in the following ways:

a) By the acceptance of a uniform calendar for the celebration of the great Christian feasts at the same time by all the churches...¹⁰

In 1923, at the Pan-Orthodox Meeting in Constantinople, convened by Ecumenical Patriarch Meletios IV, the revision of the calendar was discussed, and the famous Serbian scientist Milutin Milanković proposed a more accurate calendar than the Gregorian calendar.¹¹

A reform was proposed at that time concerning the fixed dates of the church year: Christmas, Transfiguration, Annunciation, and so on. However, the reform did not touch on the Pascal computation. Thus, several Orthodox Churches slowly adopted the calendar proposed by Milanković in 1923: the church of Estonia and Finland the year after, the church of The Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Church of Cyprus, the Church of Greece, the Church of Poland, the Church of Romania in 1928, the patriarchates of Alexandria and Antioch in 1937, the Church of Albania, and in 1968 the Orthodox Church of Bulgaria.¹²

This explains why all these churches will celebrate, for example, Christmas on 25 December, while churches that have not adopted the calendar reform will continue to celebrate Christmas according to the Julian calendar, which equates in the Gregorian calendar to 7 January. Nevertheless, all these churches

10. Metropolitan Job, *The Actuality of the Council of Nicaea*, p. 195.

11. Metropolitan Job, *The Actuality of the Council of Nicaea*, p. 195.

12. Metropolitan Job, *The Actuality of the Council of Nicaea*, p. 195.

still keep the old way of calculating Easter according to the Julian calendar and the old Pascal tables.

In preparing for the Holy and Great Council, the question of revising the calendar was pointed out on many occasions. So, it appeared on the list of the topics to be discussed during the Holy and Great Council during the meeting of 1930 on Mont Athos.¹³ Then, it appeared again at the first Pan-Orthodox Conference at Rhodes in 1961 in the section about worship.¹⁴ Then, in 1976, the first preconference in Chambésy identified the question of calendar reform and the common celebration of Easter as one of the 10 topics to be discussed by the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church.¹⁵ In light of that, the year after, in 1977, a meeting of Orthodox astronomers met in Chambésy in Geneva and recommended keeping the definition of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea 325. They discussed the inaccuracy of the Julian calendar in determining this date and the relationship between the Christian Easter and the Jewish Passover. They asked if it was necessary to consider the date used by the Jews in the calculation. Also discussed was the need for a common celebration of *Pascha*, especially in the Orthodox diaspora, where Christians live side by side and addressed the relevance of a common celebration of Easter for Christian unity. The final decision was that a revised *Paschalion* should be prepared using the most accurate astronomical data based on the Meridian of Jerusalem; these are new tables with updated dates which correspond to the contemporary astronomic data that ought to be approved by the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox church. So, Orthodox astronomers prepared everything for calendar reform.

Twenty years later, there was the famous consultation of our Commission for Faith and Order in Aleppo, which followed more or less the same resolutions as the meeting of orthodox astronomers in Chambésy in 1977, that is to say, to follow the definition of the First Ecumenical Council, to use the most accurate astronomical data, and to use as a reference for that astronomical data the Meridian of Jerusalem as this was the place of the death and the resurrection of Christ.¹⁶

13. Metropolitan Job, *The Actuality of the Council of Nicaea*, p. 195.

14. Metropolitan Job, *The Actuality of the Council of Nicaea*, p. 195.

15. Metropolitan Job, *The Actuality of the Council of Nicaea*, p. 195. See also: Archbishop Job of Telmessos, *Towards the Council*, URL: <https://holycouncil.org/towards-the-council> (accessed 10/03/2025).

16. *Towards A Common Date for Easter*, World Council of Churches / Middle East Council of Churches Consultation, Aleppo, Syria March 5-10, 1997, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/towards-a-common-date-for-easter> (accessed 10/03.2025).

Everything ought to be done under the Holy and Great Council, and in 2016, the synaxis of primates of the Orthodox Church met in Chambésy. They decided unanimously that the Holy and Great Council should be convened on the island of Crete in June 2016, but they resolved to remove the question of the calendar and the common celebration of Easter from the agenda of this Council.¹⁷ And thus, unfortunately, the question of the calendar was postponed *ad calendas graecas*, and this is where we stand today.

17. Archbishop Job of Telmessos, Towards the Council.

A Perspective from the Coptic Orthodox Tradition

Rev. Prof. Dr Arsenius Mikhail

I would like to express my sincere thanks to the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches (WCC) for extending this kind invitation to participate in this webinar on the topic of a common date for the Easter celebration. Although I claim no special expertise in the astronomical and calendrical aspects of this common debate, I approach the topic of our webinar today from the perspective of a historian of Coptic culture and ritual as well as that of a practising member and priest of the Coptic Orthodox Church, the largest of the so-called Oriental or non-Chalcedonian church communities and one that shares its Easter calculation with the vast majority of Orthodox Christians.

While this means that I do not speak in an official capacity on behalf of the Coptic Orthodox Church, I do think that my reflections on this issue are highly relevant, especially since my ecclesiastical experience is most informed by my life and service within the Coptic community of the United States, home to up to two million Coptic Christians, who remain faithful to an Easter calculation at variance with the broader society in which they live.

Today's webinar is indeed very timely for several reasons. This is due to the strong connection between the Easter debate and the first ecumenical Council of Nicaea, whose 1700th anniversary is celebrated this year, 2025, a year in which the date of Easter also coincides between all churches of East and West. Amid this opportunity and optimism to revisit such an important topic of Christian unity, I offer the following humble reflections from my experience as a historian and member of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

The Council of Nicaea and the Date of Easter

It would be no exaggeration to say that the debate over the date of the annual Easter celebration is nearly as old as Christianity itself. Already before the 4th century, works of ecclesiastical history record the divergence in the date of celebration between Christians in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) who celebrated based on the Jewish date of 14 Nisan and communities elsewhere who celebrated Easter on a movable Sunday according to a calculation independent of the Jewish Passover.¹⁸

18. See, for example, the discussion in Paul F. Bradshaw, "The Origins of Easter," in *Between Memory and Hope: Readings on the Liturgical Year*, ed. Maxwell E. Johnson (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000), 111–24; Thomas J. Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991), 1–27; Paul F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Origins of Feasts, Fasts and Seasons in Early Christianity*, Alcuin Club Collection 86 (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011), 39–59.

The issue reached its famous climax in the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE. While the topic is not mentioned within the 20 canons issued by the council, the Synodical Letter sent to the church of Alexandria at the time discusses the issue and declares henceforth a common celebration of Easter in conformity with the Roman and Alexandrian customs.¹⁹ The custom in question, which has since become an often-repeated formula, is that Easter is to be celebrated on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox, the day in which theoretically the sun's disk lines up exactly with the Earth's equator. This formula aimed to disengage the Christian celebration of Easter from the Jewish calculation of Passover, perceived both as inaccurate and undesirable as a basis for determining the central feast of Christianity.

For centuries afterward, Christians in East and West celebrated Easter on the same day, notwithstanding any remaining communities in Asia Minor or elsewhere who may have continued to follow the 14 Nisan date, termed Quartodecimans or Fourteeners.²⁰ In fact, such is still the Easter formula followed by Christians worldwide. The issue, however, is that the Nicene formula gave no details on how to determine the relevant full moon or how to calculate the spring equinox. Churches generally adopted a fixed date for the spring equinox as 21 March of the Julian calendar, irrespective of whether this in fact corresponded to the position of the sun in a given year. This theoretical approach, combined with the gradual adoption of the Gregorian calendar by Western Christians since 1582, where what was previously 21 March in fact falls on 3 April, has resulted in the current situation with which we are all familiar, where the date of Easter rarely corresponds between East and West.

The issue of unifying once again the date of Easter became especially prominent in the 20th century as ecumenical dialogue flourished between East and West. The WCC has played a key role in this regard, most notably seen in the Aleppo statement of 1997, which proposed relying on the astronomical full moon following the astronomical spring equinox determined from the meridian of Jerusalem as a location symbolic of Christian unity worldwide.²¹ Thus, the Aleppo statement sought to maintain faithfulness to the Council of Nicaea's Easter formula while providing a means for the Easter date to be once again unified between East and West.

One should also note that the Nicene formula itself promotes a clearly astronomical means of determining Easter rather than relationship to Jewish

19. The agreement is referenced, for example, in Emperor Constantine's letter to the churches concerning the date of Easter: *Epistula Constantini imp. ad omnes ecclesias* (CPG 8518). See Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 3.17–20; Ivar A. Heikel, *Eusebius Werke* 1, GCS 7 (Leipzig, 1902), 84–87.

20. Talley, *Origins of the Liturgical Year*, 5–13.

21. "Towards a Common Date for Easter."

Passover, any dogmatic principle, or worse—as is the case in all churches—reliance on a date theoretically associated with the spring equinox without regard to actual physical phenomena. The Aleppo statement provided hope for both unity among Christians and a more scientifically accurate faithfulness to the Nicene formula. Unfortunately, the recommendations of Aleppo were not adopted by churches worldwide, which continued with their traditional methods of calculating Easter for more than 25 years since then.

The Modern Coptic Context

It is also clear that the intent of the Nicene formula was to provide the universal church with a common date for the celebration of the Lord's resurrection, the central feast in the liturgical year. Yet, for many Christian communities worldwide, the fact that an "Eastern Pascha" rarely falls on the same day as "Western Easter" is accepted as a self-evident reality with no further need of change. Within the Coptic Orthodox Church, Pope Tawadros II, the spiritual leader of the Coptic Christianity worldwide, has repeatedly expressed a desire to reunify the date of Easter among the world's Christians since 2014.²² Yet, numerous conservative voices, especially within Egypt, have opposed any such attempt that would mean a change in how the Coptic Church determines the date of Easter.

Thus, while few within the Coptic Church, including the pope himself, have voiced support for such unification efforts, a vocal opposition exists which also includes numerous bishops and priests. Otherwise, one should also acknowledge that the issue is often portrayed as tangential or unimportant by the vast majority of Copts residing in Egypt. This is certainly because Coptic Christians represent the vast majority of Egypt's Christian population. In addition, the second day of Easter is an Egyptian national holiday known as *Sham al-Nasim*, further impeding a desire for change or unification with other Christian communities in East and West.

However, the situation is rather different for many Copts living in the West. While Egypt's Coptic population is estimated to be approximately ten million, nearly two million by some estimates reside outside Egypt, concentrated mainly in the United States, Canada, and Australia. Thus, a significant percentage of Copts worldwide have their homes and church communities in places where Easter is celebrated according to the Western calculation based

22. See the statements of His Holiness Pope Tawadros II, reported throughout the news media in 2014: for example, Stoyan Zaimov, "Coptic Orthodox Pope Tawadros II Suggests One Easter Date for All Christian Churches in Letter to Pope Francis," *The Christian Post*, 23 April 2014, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/coptic-orthodox-pope-tawadros-ii-suggests-one-easter-date-for-all-christian-churches-in-letter-to-pope-francis.html>.

in part on the Gregorian calendar. For such faithful Copts seeking to live out their faith and culture in Western countries, or indeed for numerous families of second and third-generation Copts with no personal connection to Egypt, the different Easter dates between their Coptic practice and that of the broader society represent not just an abstract issue of ecumenical dialogue but a very real and tangible problem year after year. This is especially the case when one considers the traditional liturgical practices associated with Good Friday and Easter, which consist of especially lengthy church services and other customs compared to any other time in the year.²³ For families of working adults and school-age children, maintaining connection to such venerable traditions can be especially challenging or downright impossible when Holy Week and Easter do not coincide between East and West.

Thus, in addition to the very important aspect of Christian unity and witness on this central feast of the gospel, the unification of Easter would also be of crucial importance for the continued vitality of traditional churches such as the Coptic Church as it continues to grow and evolve in the West. I believe that this year, 2025, much like several other years before that since the 1997 Aleppo statement, represent a great symbolic and practical opportunity for revisiting this key issue of Christian unity, when all churches worldwide will celebrate Easter on the same day of 20 April.

This year, however, provides the added advantage of being the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, so intimately connected to the issue of the Easter date. It also provides the occasion for many academic conferences and lectures worldwide discussing the council, its theology, and its legacy, including of course its role in establishing the calculation of Easter. Thus, gatherings such as this present webinar organized by the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC represent significant events with the potential of raising awareness of the issue and complex history, as well as even galvanizing public opinion on a global scale aimed at encouraging further dialogue and collaboration toward unity.

Lessons from Early and Medieval Church History

Concern over the unity of the Easter celebration, however, is not merely a modern phenomenon or the product of contemporary ecumenical concerns. Besides the Nicene formula itself designed to establish such unity, another famous episode in church history is the disagreement (c. 153 CE) between Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna, who celebrated Easter on 14 Nisan, and Bishop

23. For information on the Coptic Holy Week tradition, see, for example, Arsenius Mikhail, *For Our Salvation: Lectures and Readings on Holy Week in the Coptic Tradition* (Newport Beach: ACTS Press, 2023).

Anicetus of Rome, who followed the Roman practice of a Sunday Easter.²⁴ The key point here is that despite reaching no agreement on the matter, neither bishop labelled the other a heretic or deemed him worthy of excommunication, a refreshing example of healthy disagreement especially in the modern context.

But perhaps more interesting is another lesser-known episode from the medieval Arabic tradition concerning the celebration of Easter in 1007 CE. The episode in question is recounted in several sources, but primarily in the addendum to the *Annals* of Eutychius, Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Alexandria, written by Yahyā of Antioch in the 11th century.²⁵ There we read that in 1007 CE, during the patriarchate of Arsenius of Alexandria (d. 1010), a disagreement arose between the Eastern Orthodox Christians (known as Melkites) living in Jerusalem and those in Egypt over the accurate calculation of the Easter date and by extension the beginning of the Lenten fast preceding it. The remarkable thing in this account is that to resolve the dispute, the Egyptian Melkite leadership conferred not with their fellow Eastern Orthodox in Antioch or Constantinople but with other local Christian communities, namely the Copts and the so-called Nestorians, members of the Assyrian Church of the East. The resulting decision was that Easter that year would be on 6 Nisan (6 April), contrary to the calculations of the Melkites of Jerusalem, a decision ultimately accepted also by the church in Jerusalem.²⁶

The lesson from this remarkable account is that despite long-standing breaks in eucharistic communion and an unfortunate legacy of polemics on all sides, it was nonetheless possible for all three Christian communities in Fatimid Egypt to unite and agree on the date of Easter. It was even more remarkable that the Eastern Orthodox community preferred to confer with other local Christian leaders than to simply acquiesce to the Easter date calculated by their brothers in Jerusalem. One can only hope that such pragmatic ecumenism can still be possible today, where Christians of different calendars continue to live side by side, both in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Recommendations

So, what can be done to move this issue forward in our age? I think first of all that we have to acknowledge that the topic of a common Easter date has

24. The episode is recounted and discussed in Talley, *Origins of the Liturgical Year*, 18–24.

25. On the sequel to the *Annals* by Yahyā ibn Sa'īd al-Anṭākī, see Mark N. Swanson, “Yahyā ibn Sa'īd al-Anṭākī,” in *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History, Volume 2 (900–1050)*, ed. David Thomas and Alex Mallett, *History of Christian-Muslim Relations* 14, (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 657–661. See also Georg Graf, *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur*, vol. 2, *Studi e Testi* 133 (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1947), 49–51.

26. I. Kratchkovsky and A. Vasiliev, *Histoire de Yahya-ibn-Sa'īd d'Antioche*, vol. 2, *Patrologia Orientalis* 23.3 (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1932), 273–78.

yet to acquire the urgency it deserves in many of our communities, where it is viewed with either indifference or outright suspicion and hostility. The first order of business then must be to raise awareness of the ideas I have tried to highlight in this brief and over-simplified contribution: namely that the issue is one of calendrical observances rather than dogmatic positions, that the goal of a common Easter date is not merely of abstract significance for ecumenical dialogue but of very practical significance for Christian families and communities, and that the desire for such a date is not a modern-day obsession or trend but has been consistent throughout church history.

Another underlying point that may not be as well-known to the public is that, similar to the difference in the date of Christmas between most of the world (25 December) and churches that still celebrate it on 6 or 7 January, the Easter debate too is strongly connected to the continued use of the Julian calendar centuries after the introduction of the Gregorian calendar reform in 1582 CE. Adoption of the Gregorian calendar for the calculation of the spring equinox and the date of Easter would help to eliminate the recurring difference in Easter between East and West. Thus, my final suggestion is that churches still employing the Julian calendar, such as the Coptic Orthodox Church, should seriously consider a broader calendar reform that would include both the fixed feasts such as Christmas and the movable cycle of Lent-Easter. Such a reform would have the advantage of addressing Christmas and Easter together rather than introducing incomplete changes to one or the other major feasts of the church. While such a step may also seem unlikely for a conservative faith community, already in one area, the Coptic Diocese of Los Angeles and Southern California, permission is given in certain years for parishes to hold nativity services on 25 December for pastoral reasons. Such a measure, approved and promoted by H.E. Metropolitan Serapion of Los Angeles, has been met with recurring opposition.²⁷

Yet it is precisely such prudent and local measures designed to bring the church's calendar into some measure of conformity with local reality that show signs of hope that someday the Coptic Orthodox Church and similarly conservative churches may agree to a unified calendar and Easter calculation. This is not only for the noble goal of Christian unity and witness, but just as importantly for the sake of millions of Christians worldwide who struggle to remain faithful to their own tradition while following an outdated calendar that is out of sync with their own lives in the contemporary Western world.

27. See coverage of this pastoral decision and opposition: Rose Hosny, "Pope Stands up for Anba Serapion on Nativity Feast Celebration," *Watani*, 17 December 2019, https://en.wataninet.com/coptic-affairs-coptic-affairs/coptic-affairs/pope-stands-up-for-anba-serapion-on-nativity-feast-celebration/31409/#google_vignette&gsc.tab=0.

A Roman Catholic Perspective

Dr Johannes Oeldemann

The Paschal Triduum, from Holy Thursday to Easter Sunday, is the summit of the liturgical year in the Roman Catholic Church—as in all Christian churches. To bear credible witness to our faith, it is of utmost importance that Christians commemorate the suffering and dying, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ together. Therefore, I would like to share some thoughts on the question of a common Easter date from a Roman Catholic perspective. What I say in the following is my personal view, but one that I believe is shared by many Catholics.

The Council of Nicaea on the Date of Easter

This year we are celebrating the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, which is regarded as the first ecumenical council, having a fundamental significance for all Christian churches to this day. I would, therefore, like to begin by recalling what this council decided about Easter.

The council fathers found a common solution to the then controversial question of when Easter should be celebrated, as we know from a letter from the council to the Church of Egypt, Libya, and Pentapolis.²⁸ However, the canons of the Council of Nicaea carry no provisions regarding the date of Easter.²⁹ The rule for calculating the date of Easter that most churches refer to today—that is, Easter should be celebrated on the first Sunday after the first full moon following the spring equinox—is found only in later documents. “There is no indication whatsoever that the council made any decree concerning the matters of a lunar cycle or the equinox.”³⁰

From my point of view, this indicates that the primary concern of the council was to agree on a common date for Easter, not to establish a specific rule that would be unalterable for all time. The council fathers were concerned with strengthening the credibility of the Christian faith through a common celebration of the feast of the resurrection of Jesus Christ in the entire *oikoumene*, the whole known world at that time. Regarding the anniversary

28. “Letter to the Church of Egypt, Libya, and Pentapolis,” in *Fontes Nicaenae Synodi: The Contemporary Sources for the Study of the Council of Nicaea (304–337)*, ed. Samuel Fernández (Paderborn, 2024), 149.

29. Greek and English text of the canons are in Fernández, *Fontes Nicaenae Synodi*, 132–45. See Andreas Weckwerth, “The Twenty Canons of the Council of Nicaea,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea*, ed. Richard Kim Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 158–76.

30. Daniel P. McCarthy, “The Council of Nicaea and the Celebration of the Christian Pasch,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea*, 177–201, at 191.

and our witness in the contemporary world, this means that remaining faithful to the legacy of the Council of Nicaea is not a question of following a specific rule, but of finding a way to celebrate Easter together again in the future.

Current Practice in the Roman Catholic Church

It may be surprising to realize that in the current practice of the Roman Catholic Church, not all Catholics celebrate Easter on the same date. The reason for this, even if it may seem paradoxical at first glance, is the great importance for Catholics of celebrating Easter together. This is especially true for Christians in one place or region. In families where one spouse is Catholic and the other Orthodox, different dates for Easter pose a major challenge because the fasting periods and feast days differ. Catholics, therefore, consider the question of Easter primarily from a pastoral point of view. Even though most Catholics celebrate Easter according to the Gregorian calendar, in some countries they, along with the majority of the population, celebrate Easter according to the Julian calendar (e.g., in Greece and in Ukraine). This is evidence of a certain pragmatism on the part of Roman Catholics; but in my opinion, this is exactly what the Council of Nicaea wanted: the common celebration of Easter is the decisive factor, not the date itself.

Official Statements from Roman Catholic Side

In the context of the anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, however, we are not concerned with the question of how regional agreements could be reached regarding the date of Easter, but of how it could be possible for all Christians worldwide to once again celebrate the feast of the Lord's resurrection together on one day. The Synod of the Catholic Church, which concluded in October 2024, spent more than three years examining the importance of synodality for the life of the church. Its final document emphasizes that the anniversary of the Council of Nicaea "will also be an opportunity to launch bold initiatives for a common date for Easter so that we can celebrate the Resurrection of the Lord on the same day, as will happen, providentially, in 2025."³¹

On 25 January 2025, during the ecumenical prayer service at the end of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, Pope Francis emphasized that the Catholic Church is prepared to accept any proposal that leads to a common

31. Pope Francis and the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission: Final Document* (October 2024), par. 139, https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2024-10-26_final-document/ENG---Documento-finale.pdf.

Easter.³² In concrete terms, this means that the Roman Catholic Church does not insist on the 400-year-old tradition of calculating the date of Easter according to the Gregorian calendar. Dialogue between Pope Francis and the Coptic Pope Tawadros II (in personal meetings, during phone calls, and in a regular exchange of letters on the Day of Friendship between Copts and Catholics)³³ has included talk of celebrating Easter on the third Sunday in April in the future and thus avoiding all differences between the calendars. Already the Second Vatican Council declared that it would not object if the feast of Easter were assigned to a particular Sunday, “provided that those whom it may concern, especially the brethren who are not in communion with the Apostolic See, give their assent.”³⁴ Personally, I am sceptical whether all churches are prepared to accept such a proposal. However, the Roman Catholic Church clearly does not claim that everyone else should follow *its* rule but states that it is prepared to follow the others if there is a chance that Easter can be celebrated together in future as a result.

What Needs to Be Considered and What Needs to Be Done

Easter 2025 would be a good opportunity to return to the practice of celebrating Easter together. Realistically, however, we need a longer process to prepare such a decision, because Easter is not just a church feast but also a cultural reality that shapes social life in many aspects. For example, many countries have school holidays around Easter. These are planned on a long-term basis so that sufficient advance planning is required if the churches are to agree to a different date for Easter than is currently in our state calendars.

In addition, we should be aware that, most probably, a common Easter date will not come about because all bishops worldwide suddenly have an inspiration from the Holy Spirit that leads to a solution of this centuries-long controversy. We need to think about what concrete steps can be taken, because the Holy Spirit needs people as his instruments. So, who should take these steps? I would like to take up a suggestion made in the study document on the Bishop of Rome and his service to Christian unity, published by the

32. See Pope Francis, *Homily of the Holy Father, Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls, Saturday, 25 January 2025*, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2025/documents/20250125-vespri-unita-cristiani.html>.

33. Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, *Ecumenical Relations with the Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate of Egypt*, <https://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-orientale/chiese-ortodosse-orientali/relazioni-bilaterali/patriarcato-copto-ortodosso-degitto.html>.

34. See Pope Paul VI and the Second Vatican Council, “Appendix: A Declaration on the Revision of the Calendar,” in *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* Sacrosanctum Concilium, *Solemnly Promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on December 4, 1963*, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html.

Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity in June 2024. In addition to strengthening synodality *ad intra*—that is, within the Catholic Church—the text argues in favour of developing synodality *ad extra*. More specifically, this means promoting “conciliar fellowship through regular meetings among Church leaders at a worldwide level in order to make visible and deepen the communion they already share.”³⁵

In Conclusion: A Concrete Proposal

Therefore, in conclusion, I offer a very concrete proposal: There are apparently plans for a meeting between Pope Francis and Patriarch Bartholomew on the occasion of the Council of Nicaea’s anniversary at its historical venue in İznik in May 2025. What if other church leaders—such as the Orthodox patriarchs of Alexandria, Antiochia, and Jerusalem; the patriarchs of the Oriental Orthodox churches; the Archbishop of Canterbury (if there is one elected by then) as representative of the Anglican Communion; and the President of the Lutheran World Federation—were invited to the meeting? Such an “ecumenical synaxis” (to take up a terminology coined by Patriarch Bartholomew) could issue a mandate to draw up a concrete proposal by the next common Easter, which is due again in three years’ time. Remarkably, Easter will fall on the same date every three years in the Gregorian and Julian calendars over the next ten years (2025, 2028, 2031, and 2034). The decade ahead of us offers the opportunity to give new momentum to efforts to agree on a common date for Easter. Thus, I would like to conclude with the plea: Let us use this *kairos* and seriously search for a common date of Easter.

35. Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, *The Bishop of Rome: Primacy and Synodality in the Ecumenical Dialogues and in the Responses to the Encyclical Ut unum sint. A Study Document*, Collana *Ut Unum Sint* 7 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticano, 2024), par. 181, <https://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/documenti/altri-testi/the-bishop-of-rome.html>.

A Lutheran Perspective

Rev. Dr Tomi Karttunen

The Adoption of the Gregorian Calendar in Protestant Europe

My contextual perspective on the celebration of Easter is European, Lutheran, and Finnish. The current Finnish calendar's historical background lies in the era when Finland was part of Sweden and its Lutheran state church until 1809, as well as in general European Protestant and ecumenical praxis. Medieval pre-Gregorian Catholic influence and some Eastern Orthodox impulses are also present.

Unlike Catholic European countries, Finland did not adopt the Gregorian calendar in the 1580s. The pope's ambassadors tried to persuade the Protestant countries to follow the Gregorian reform, but with poor results. These countries had religious and political reasons not to institute a calendar reform. Moreover, Finland in that period had its own way of calculating time. In the 1600s, Sweden and Finland began using the Julian calendar, despite the fact that, in Western Europe, the Gregorian calendar was proving to be more precise and practical.³⁶ Toward the end of the 17th century, Germany developed an improved calendar that used the Gregorian rule of a leap day but followed an astronomical rule for Easter. Many Protestant countries—such as the German Protestant states, Denmark, and the Protestant cantons of Switzerland—used this improved calendar, in which 18 February 1700 was followed by 1 March 1700. By the end of the 18th century, many countries had started to use the Gregorian calendar and the Gregorian rule for Easter.³⁷

In Sweden and Finland—the latter of which was the eastern part of the Swedish kingdom for 600 years (c. 1150–1809)—the Julian calendar was used until 1740. The next step was that an astronomical rule for Easter became part of the Julian calendar. Eventually, in 1753, the kingdom started using the Gregorian calendar: 17 February 1753 was followed by 1 March 1753. Sweden and Finland thus began following the Gregorian calendar with an astronomical date for Easter—in this way using the improved German calendar. When, in 1809, Finland became an autonomous Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire, this presented its own challenges for the calendar question. Finally, in 1869, Finland began to use the Gregorian calendar with the Gregorian rule for Easter.³⁸

36. Onerva Ollila, Asko Palviainen, and Minna Saarelma-Paukkala, *Ajan tasalla: Suomalainen kalenteri tänään* (Helsinki: Otava, 2019), 20–21.

37. Ollila, Palviainen, and Saarelma-Paukkala, *Ajan tasalla*, 21.

38. Ollila, Palviainen, and Saarelma-Paukkala, *Ajan tasalla*, 22–23.

From a historical perspective, the Finnish tradition would probably be quite open to a model that dated Easter astronomically in the spirit of Nicaea.³⁹ In the Finnish context, I do not recognize a utilitarian argumentation in the recent discussion that supports a fixed date for Easter. Ecumenically, astronomical dating would open an alternative to using a calendar which, based on the best available scientific knowledge, placed Easter according to the Nicene rule between 22 March and 25 April. The priority of the Nicene Council seems to have been to celebrate Easter together using the best available astronomical knowledge, which symbolically refers to a cosmic Christology that is already included in the date of Easter. Creation and redemption belong together. The implication is quite clear in the rule that Easter is celebrated on the Sunday following the first vernal full moon. Sunday, the day of resurrection, proclaims the victory of light and life over darkness and death. In the synodal letter after the first Council of Nicaea, the intention that Easter should be celebrated jointly on Sunday, the day of resurrection, not on Saturday as in the Jewish tradition, seems very clear.⁴⁰

The Finnish Context: Already Celebrating Easter Together

The Finnish context is unique, and perhaps even pioneering, because the churches of the Western and Eastern Orthodox traditions celebrate Easter together. The Nicene Council's intention that Christians should celebrate

39. See the description of the benefits of astronomical calculation at the WCC consultation in Aleppo in 1997, "Towards a Common Date for Easter": "As is well known, the Julian calendar at present diverges from the astronomical by thirteen days; the Gregorian at present does not diverge significantly, though it will in the distant future. Less well known is the fact that both Julian and Gregorian calculations rely upon conventional tables for determining the lunar cycle. For both modes of calculation, these tables at times give results that diverge from the astronomical data."

40. See the recommendations by the WCC Aleppo consultation in 1997: "11. In the estimation of this consultation the most likely way to succeed in achieving a common date for Easter in our own day would be (a) to maintain the Nicene norms (that Easter should fall on the Sunday following the first vernal full moon), and (b) to calculate the astronomical date (the vernal equinox and the full moon) by the most accurate possible scientific means, (c) using as the basis for reckoning the meridian of Jerusalem, the place of Christ's death and resurrection." See also "First Council of Nicaea 325 AD," Papal Encyclicals Online, <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/ecum01.htm>; and Herbert Thurston, "Easter Controversy," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 5 (New York : Robert Appleton Company 1909), transcribed for *New Advent* by Michael T. Barrett (2023), <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05228a.htm>: "In 314, in the Council of Arles, it had been laid down that in future Easter should be kept *uno die et uno tempore per omnem orbem*, and that to secure this uniformity the pope should send out letters to all the churches. The Council of Nicaea seems to have extended further the principle here laid down. As already stated, we do not have its exact words, but we may safely infer from scattered notices that the council ruled: that Easter must be celebrated by all throughout the world on the same Sunday; that this Sunday must follow the fourteenth day of the paschal moon; that that moon was to be accounted the paschal moon whose fourteenth day followed the spring equinox; that some provision should be made, probably by the Church of Alexandria as best skilled in astronomical calculations, for determining the proper date of Easter and communicating it to the rest of the world."

Easter together clearly underlies this. This is also an important precondition for common witness in the context of a secular and pluralistic society and it is practical for organizing worship, as in the Finnish state calendar not only Easter Sunday but also Good Friday and Easter Monday are official holidays. In recent decades, the Orthodox Church, whose members constitute about 1.1 percent of Finland's population (Lutherans constitute about 63 percent) have received much positive publicity because the Orthodox-worshiping life and Easter traditions are experienced as beautiful, mystical, and exotic. Some Lutherans have adopted some of them.

There are also geopolitical and national identity factors in the Finnish Orthodox Church's decision to celebrate Easter according to the tradition of Finnish society. There is no longer any Western–Eastern church tension here. The state's recognition of the Gregorian calendar as a general method to manage European and global dates reinforced national identity in the Finnish society on its way toward independence. Under the pressure of Russian unification, policy willingness to become independent strengthened. The Russian revolution in 1917 opened a window of opportunity for this. During the chaotic times that followed the revolution and the First World War, the Finnish Orthodox Church was recognized as part of the Patriarchate of Constantinople and an autonomous church based on a *Tomos* issued in 1923.

In the autumn of 2023, the Orthodox Bishops' Conference in Finland confirmed the principle that Easter should be celebrated according to the decision made in 1923. The Orthodox therefore celebrate Easter at the same time as the other Finnish mainline churches. The common point of reference is the instruction of the Council of Nicaea in 325 to celebrate Easter on the Sunday following the first vernal full moon. The spring equinox was defined as 21 March. The church should use the best available astronomical knowledge in the calculations. The Finnish Orthodox bishops argued as follows:

On 9 June 1923 Ecumenical Patriarch Meletios IV stated in “Ekklesiastike Aletheia”, the official journal of the Patriarchate of Constantinople: removing the difference between the religious and state way of calculating time is absolutely necessary, and there is no canonical hindrance to amending the ecclesial way of counting time to correspond to the findings of astronomy. According to Meletios defining the full moon would happen based on astronomical calculations, taking scientific progress into account. The “calendar of Meletios” described here was

approved for use in our local church at the extraordinary synod in 1923 and received confirmation from the state on 31 August 1923.⁴¹

Many Finnish Orthodox Christians now live in ecumenical marriages where their spouse is Lutheran. It is also pastorally and ecumenically good to be able to celebrate Easter together as Christians in the same family, with relatives and friends. Easter is a vital part of Christian faith and life. When Christians celebrate Easter together, it supports the positive understanding of unity in diversity within Finnish society. It enriches and provides mutual empowerment when different traditions carry the core Christian message in their own ways. A common Easter has been unable to stop the march of secularization, but it does pave the way for deepening our witness to Easter today. Taking further steps internationally would also give an important signal and would probably revitalize ecumenical cooperation in other areas.

41. Piispainkokouksen lausunto. Asia 23. Kirkolliskokousaloite yhteisestä ortodoksisesta pääsiäisestä. [The Bishop of Rome. The statement of the Bishops' Conference of the Orthodox Church of Finland on the date of Easter], 2023, https://ort.fi/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Piispainkokouksen-lausunto-paasiaisen-ajankohdasta-kirkolliskokouksessa-2023_0.pdf (accessed 17.12. December 2024).

Summary of the Webinar Discussion

This chapter outlines the key issues that participants addressed during the webinar.

"Please help to make the common date for Easter a reality"

Most of the questions posed in the webinar's chat and Q&A focused on participants' desire to see the churches find a common way of determining the date of Easter and asked how it might be done. A minority of participants posted that perhaps the churches should just accept that this is a matter of Christian diversity. There was a suggestion that the Commission on Faith and Order might do further work on the question. However, the task of Faith and Order is to "serve the churches as they *call one another* to visible unity," rather than to call the churches to adopt a particular conclusion. Thus, the hope of the Faith and Order Commission is that the webinar and this follow-up publication will encourage the churches to do that work together.

"Why did the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church in 2016 not address the question of Easter?"

Metropolitan Job offered an extensive response to this question:

Everything had been prepared ahead of time, before the Holy and Great Council, so the calendar reform and the paschal reform could have taken place at the Holy and Great Council. But in the synaxis that decided on the date of the council and its agenda, voices were raised from the delegation of the Church of Russia followed by a few other churches that the believers of the church are not ready for a calendar reform and that a calendar reform could create schism. And for this reason, in order to avoid schism, the hierarchs of the synaxis of 2016 in January 2016 in Geneva decided to take the question of the calendar reform off the agenda.

Very often there is a reference that the faithful are not ready for a calendar reform. My question to the people using that argument is to say: "What are you doing to prepare the Believers for a calendar reform?" I share the view of Dr Johannes Oeldemann that we have to take this opportunity in these upcoming years to explain to the people why there is a difference and why we should resolve it.

Because of course, as you can see, everybody uses the definition of Nicaea. The problem is that some of the tools we are using no longer correspond to the astronomic data, and therefore we can say that they are in contradiction with the resolution of Nicaea.”

“Should we not amend our language around not celebrating Easter when Jewish people celebrate Passover?”

A former Faith and Order moderator, the Rev. Dr Susan Durber, asked if Christians should handle the language of “no longer celebrating with the Jews” more carefully, as it suggests a deliberate decision to separate the Christian and Jewish communities. The Rev. Dr Dagmar Heller, who participated as a World Council of Churches (WCC) programme executive at the Aleppo consultation, replied that by calculating the date to align with the Jewish Passover, Easter would move significantly around the calendar from year to year; it might even fall twice in one calendar year. Thus, the issue is the calendar, not proximity to the Jewish Passover. It is important to make that distinction.

Concluding Remarks

Moderator Sandra Beardsall concluded the webinar by remarking that the gathering had heard some excellent proposals from the panelists and from participants in the chat and in the Q&A for finding ways to help the churches continue to dialogue and work on the challenging question of the Easter date and encouraging them to come together to do that work. All the participants heard that the next decade will bring exciting opportunities for the churches to act and compelling reasons to do so. She concluded with deep thanks to the panelists for bringing everyone into this discussion and offering so many theological possibilities and practical suggestions for moving forward. She stated the hope that each in their own contexts had been animated to find ways to work with fellow Christians, to ask that question about Easter, and perhaps this year to celebrate Easter ecumenically as Easter falls on the same day for all.

The Aleppo Proposal for a Common Date for Easter

Rev. Dr Dagmar Heller

The desire to celebrate the feast of the resurrection of Jesus Christ on one and the same day in all of Christendom has come to the attention of many churches, particularly through the modern ecumenical movement. After the proposal to set Easter on a specific Sunday (in April) emerged in the secular world in the first quarter of the 20th century for very practical reasons, the churches also began to consider this question. Following several surveys among the member churches of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and statements from the Roman Catholic Church, it became clear that most churches of the Western tradition, including the Roman Catholic Church, could in principle support the secular idea and that the Eastern Orthodox churches in particular would like to adhere to the rule dating back to the Council of Nicaea in 325, which states that Easter should be celebrated on the first Sunday after the first full moon following the spring equinox.

All churches follow this rule, but due to the use of different calendars (Julian or Gregorian) and therefore different formulas for calculating the equinox and full moon, they ultimately arrive at different dates for Easter. This situation was and is a painful problem, especially in countries where different Christian churches live closely together as a minority.

In the mid-1990s, in view of the impending turn of the millennium and the fact that in 2001 the two Easter dates would coincide, the issue was taken up again not only in WCC circles but also in discussions between Rome and the Patriarchate of Constantinople. Following an initiative by the then Syrian Orthodox Metropolitan Mar Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim of Aleppo, the executive committee of the WCC therefore commissioned its two departments for Worship and Spirituality and Faith and Order at the time to revisit the issue. Thus, in cooperation with the Middle East Council of Churches, the WCC organized a consultation in Aleppo (Syria) in March 1997 with the title "Towards a Common Date of Easter."

To have the broadest possible representation of all Christian denominations, the Christian World Communions were invited to send representatives. In this way the Eastern Orthodox were represented through the ecumenical patriarchate, the Patriarchate of Moscow, and the Patriarchate of Antioch and the Oriental Orthodox churches through the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Syrian Orthodox Church. From the Western churches, representatives were sent from the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Communion, the Old Catholic Church of the Union of Utrecht, the Lutheran World Federation,

and the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. Representatives were also sent from the Middle East Council of Churches and the Evangelical Churches of the Middle East. One person from the Pentecostal churches took part as a “consultant.”

The recommendations drawn up by this consultation take up an approach that was already proposed in 1977 and 1982 by two Orthodox conferences in Chambésy (Switzerland) in preparation for the Great and Holy Council of the Orthodox Church. They amount to retaining the rule of Nicaea, because it is already followed by all churches and therefore represents a bond of unity. At the same time, the statement calls upon the churches to use modern astronomical calculations to calculate the equinox and full moon, as they arise for Jerusalem as a reference point.

The Aleppo statement was presented to the churches through the Christian World Communions and was well received. Various churches (of both Eastern and Western traditions) expressed their interest in seriously discussing the proposal. The reactions that reached the secretariat for Faith and Order included great approval from many churches; but some Orthodox circles expressed strong rejection because the Julian calendar was considered untouchable. However, negative experiences with calendar changes in the Orthodox churches also play a role here. One particular criticism concerns the fact that the Aleppo consultation did not satisfactorily deal with the important rule for Orthodox Christians not to celebrate Easter “together with the Jews.” The Russian Orthodox Church therefore officially rejected the Aleppo recommendations and instead called on the Western churches to adopt the Julian Easter date calculation.

To summarize, it should be noted that the Aleppo statement has attracted a great deal of attention because, on the one hand, it responds to the Orthodox concern to retain the rule of Nicaea, but, on the other hand, it takes up the widespread concern in the West to harmonize calendar calculations with astronomical realities. It is also worth noting in this context that the proposal means a change both for the churches that follow the Julian calendar and for those that use the Gregorian calendar, as the latter is not entirely astronomically correct either. The strength of Aleppo, therefore, lies in the fact that neither side is favoured. The weakness, however, is that a change for the Western churches will not occur until the next century, and it appears as if it means to adopt the Gregorian Easter calculation.

With the Aleppo consultation and the ensuing discussion, the lasting importance of the rule of Nicaea and a movable date for Easter came to the fore over against the proposal of a fixed Sunday. Aleppo preserves the link

between the date of Easter and the natural cycle and the symbolism associated with it, as well as the link with the Jewish Passover. With Jerusalem as reference point, it may even help the churches in the Southern hemisphere to accept the symbolism of the Nicene rule, although for them the northern spring equinox is the autumn equinox.

Towards a Common Date for Easter

World Council of Churches / Middle East Council of Churches
Consultation, Aleppo, Syria, March 5–10, 1997

“Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival.” 1 Cor. 5:7-8.

I. The Issues

Background to this consultation

1. In the 20th century the churches have rediscovered a deep concern for Christian unity. They have expressed this in their efforts to find common ground on theological issues that have long divided them. They have learned to give common witness in a variety of ways. But despite this progress towards visible unity, many challenges remain. One very sensitive issue, with enormous pastoral consequences for all the Christian faithful, has taken on growing urgency: the need to find a common date for the celebration of Easter, the Holy Pascha, the feast of Christ’s resurrection. By celebrating this feast of feasts on different days, the churches give a divided witness to this fundamental aspect of the apostolic faith, compromising their credibility and effectiveness in bringing the Gospel to the world. This is a matter of concern for all Christians. Indeed, in some parts of the world such as the Middle East, where several separated Christian communities constitute a minority in the larger society, this has become an urgent issue. While there has been some discussion of this question, it still has not been given the serious attention that it deserves.

2. While the question of a common date for Easter/Pascha has been addressed at different times since the earliest Christian centuries, a renewed discussion of this issue has arisen in the present century in the churches of both East and West. It also has emerged in significant ways in the secular world. The question was put to the wider Christian world in a 1920 encyclical of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and addressed in a 1923 Pan-Orthodox congress, whose decision to revise their calendar unfortunately led to several schisms within the Orthodox churches. Around the same time, discussion was beginning in secular circles especially in Western Europe concerning the possibility of establishing a fixed day for Easter, such as the Sunday following the second Saturday in April, so as to facilitate commercial planning and public activities. In addition, proposals for introducing a new fixed calendar were being advanced, for similar utilitarian reasons. After World War II the context for discussion of such issues changed in several ways. International secular initiatives received little support. The churches were especially opposed

to any calendar reform which would break the cycle of the seven-day week. On the other hand, many churches continued to express interest in the idea of a common day, whether movable or fixed, for the celebration of Easter/Pascha. The Orthodox returned to the paschal question from 1961 onwards, in the context of preparations for the Great and Holy Council of the Orthodox Church; the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council (1963) gave renewed impetus in the Roman Catholic Church to discussion of this issue; and since 1965 the World Council of Churches (WCC) has taken up the subject on a number of occasions.

3. In recent years, concrete steps have been taken in the Middle East, where Christians of so many traditions live closely together in a largely non-Christian society. The Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) has been particularly active in encouraging and facilitating the celebration of Easter/Pascha on a common day. Two recent WCC consultations have taken up this concern. A consultation on “Christian Spirituality for Our Times” (Iasi, Romania, May 1994) proposed that “a new initiative be taken towards the common celebration of Easter.” Even more striking are the conclusions reached by the consultation “Towards Koinonia in Worship” (Ditchingham, England, August 1994):

Besides the work already done on baptism, eucharist and ministry, the churches need to address the renewal of preaching, the recovery of the meaning of Sunday and the search for a common celebration of Pascha as ecumenical theological concerns. This last is especially urgent, since an agreement on a common date for Easter—even an interim agreement—awaits further ecumenical developments. Such an agreement, which cannot depend on the idea of a “fixed date of Easter”, should respect the deepest meaning of the Christian Pascha, and the feelings of Christians throughout the world. We welcome all initiatives which offer the hope of progress in this important area.⁴²

In view of the concerns expressed at these consultations, the committee of the WCC, meeting in Bucharest, September 1994, recommended that Unit I, “especially the Ecclesial Unity/Faith and Order stream and the Worship and Spirituality stream, give renewed attention to the subject of the common celebration of Easter, keeping in mind that in the year 2001, the dates of Easter according to both Eastern and Western calendars coincide.”

42. T. F. Best and D. Heller, eds, *So We Believe, So We Pray: Towards Koinonia in Worship*, Faith and Order Paper No. 171 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1995), 9–10.

4. The present consultation, meeting in Aleppo, Syria, March 5–10, 1997, comes in response to this request. Sponsored jointly by Unit I of the WCC and by the MECC, it brings together representatives of a number of communions which participate in the annual meeting of the Conference of Secretaries of Christian World Communions, representatives of the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches, representatives of the MECC, and invited experts and staff. Together participants in the consultation enjoyed the hospitality of the Syrian Orthodox Archdiocese of Aleppo and experienced first-hand the commitment to unity of the Christian communities of this city. At a meeting with members of these communities, they listened to a call for removal of the painful sign of separation that differing dates for Easter/Pascha constitute. In an atmosphere of prayer and common study, participants considered the problem of a common day for the celebration of Easter/Pascha from various perspectives—theological, historical, liturgical, catechetical, and pastoral. The consultation offers to all the churches the following observations and recommendations.

Christ's resurrection, basis of our common faith

5. The apostolic faith of the church is based on the reality of the resurrection of Christ. As St Paul says: “Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the death, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised, and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith is in vain” (1 Cor. 15:12-14). Viewed as the ultimate victory over the powers of sin and death, the resurrection of the Lord is not only a historical event but also the sign of God’s power over all the forces that can keep us from his love and goodness. It is a victory not only for Christ himself but also for all those united with him (1 Pet. 1:3f). It is a victory which marks the beginning of a new era (John 20:17). The resurrection is the ultimate expression of the Father’s gift of reconciliation and unity in Christ through the Spirit. It is a sign of the unity and reconciliation that God wills for the entire creation.

6. As the apostles began their missionary activity, the resurrection was at the heart of their preaching (1 Cor. 15: 1-17; Acts 2:22-36; 1 Pet. 1:3), and as the evangelists began to record aspects of the Lord’s teachings and ministry, the resurrection comes as the culminating event in their gospels. In every aspect of her life, the early church was first and foremost the community of the resurrection. Thus, the early church’s life of worship focused on God’s reconciling love as manifested in the saving passover of Christ’s death and resurrection. The first day of the week became the preeminent day of the Christian assembly because it was the day on which the Lord rose from the

dead (John 20:1; Acts 20:7). At the same time, this came to be known as the “eighth day,” a day of new creation and ultimate fulfillment. Each year too, Christians both remembered and experienced the continuing power of Christ’s passion and resurrection in a single but multifaceted celebration. This celebration also became the occasion for baptism, in which Christians shared in Christ’s passage from death to life, dying to sin and rising to new life in him. Therefore, the behaviour of Christians was rooted in their relationship with the risen Lord and reflected the new reality inaugurated by him (Col. 3:111).

Historical background to the present differences

7. The New Testament indicates that Christ’s death and resurrection were historically associated with the Jewish Passover, but the precise details of this association are not clear. According to the synoptic gospels, Jesus’ last supper was a Passover meal, which would place his death on the day after Passover, while according to John his death occurred on the day itself, indeed at the very hour, when the paschal lambs were sacrificed. By the end of the 2nd century some churches celebrated Easter/Pascha on the day of the Jewish Passover, regardless of the day of the week, while others celebrated it on the following Sunday. By the 4th century, the former practice had been abandoned practically universally, but differences still remained in the calculation of the date of Easter/Pascha. The ecumenical council held at Nicaea in 325 CE determined that Easter/Pascha should be celebrated on the Sunday following the first vernal full moon. Originally, Passover was celebrated on the first full moon after the March equinox, but in the 3rd century the day of the feast came to be calculated by some Jewish communities without reference to the equinox, thus causing Passover to be celebrated twice in some solar years. Nicaea tried to avoid this by linking the principles for the dating of Easter/Pascha to the norms for the calculation of Passover during Jesus’ lifetime.

8. While certain differences in the mechanics of determining the date of Easter/Pascha remained even after Nicaea, which occasionally resulted in local differences, by the 6th century the mode of calculation based on the studies of Alexandrian astronomers and scholars had gained universal acceptance. By the 16th century, however, the discrepancy between this mode of calculation and the observed astronomical data was becoming evident. This led to the calendar change introduced by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582. Since that time, Western Christians have come to calculate the date of Easter on the basis of this newer Gregorian calendar, while the Eastern churches generally have continued to follow the older Julian calendar. While calendrical changes in some of the Orthodox churches in 1923 affected fixed-date feasts, the calculation of the Easter date remained linked to the Julian calendar. Our present differences

in calculation of the date of Easter thus may be ascribed to differences in the calendars and lunar tables employed rather than to differences in fundamental theological outlook.

9. In its study of the mechanics of the paschal calculation, the consultation took note of the fact that both the current Eastern (Julian) and the current Western (Gregorian) calculations diverge in certain respects from the astronomical data as determined by precise scientific calculation. As is well-known, the Julian calendar at present diverges from the astronomical by 13 days; the Gregorian at present does not diverge significantly, though it will in the distant future. Less well-known is the fact that both Julian and Gregorian calculations rely upon conventional tables for determining the lunar cycle. For both modes of calculation, these tables at times give results that diverge from the astronomical data.

The continuing relevance of the Council of Nicaea

10. In the course of their deliberations, the participants in the consultation came to a deeper appreciation of the continuing relevance of the Council of Nicaea for the present discussion. The decisions of this council, rooted as they are in scripture and tradition, came to be regarded as normative for the whole church.

(a) Despite differences in the method of calculation, the principles of calculation in the churches of both East and West are based on the norms set forth at Nicaea. This fact is of great significance. In the present divided situation, any decision by one church or group of churches to move away from these norms would only increase the difficulty of resolving outstanding differences.

(b) The Council of Nicaea's decisions are expressive of the desire for unity. The council's aim was to establish principles, based upon the scriptural data concerning the association of the passion and resurrection of Christ with Passover, which would encourage a single annual observance of Easter/Pascha by all the churches. By fostering unity in this way, the council also demonstrated its concern for the mission of the church in the world. The council was aware that disunity in such a central matter was a cause of scandal.

(c) The Nicene norms affirm the intimate connection between the biblical Passover (see especially Ex. 12:18; Lev. 23:5; Num. 28:16; Deut. 16:1-2) and the Christian celebration of "Christ our paschal lamb" (1 Cor. 5:7). While the council rejected the principle of dependence on contemporary Jewish reckoning, it did so on the grounds that this had changed and become inaccurate, not because it regarded this connection as unimportant.

(d) In the course of their discussions, the consultation also gained a deeper

appreciation for the wealth of symbolism that the Nicene norms permit. In the worship of many of the churches, especially in the biblical readings and hymnography of the paschal season, Christians are reminded not only of the important link between Passover and the Christian Easter/Pascha but also of other aspects of salvation history. For example, they are reminded that in Christ's resurrection all creation is renewed. Some early Christian sources thus linked the Genesis account of the seven days of creation with the week of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection.

(e) The Council of Nicaea also has an enduring lesson for Christians today in its willingness to make use of contemporary science in calculating the date of Easter. While the council sought to advance the concrete unity of the churches, it did not itself undertake a detailed regulation of the Easter calculation. Instead, it expected the churches to employ the most exact science of the day for calculating the necessary astronomical data (the March equinox and the full moon).

II. Two Recommendations

First recommendation

11. In the estimation of this consultation, the most likely way to succeed in achieving a common date for Easter in our own day would be

- (a) to maintain the Nicene norms (that Easter should fall on the Sunday following the first vernal full moon), and
- (b) to calculate the astronomical data (the vernal equinox and the full moon) by the most accurate possible scientific means,
- (c) using as the basis for reckoning the meridian of Jerusalem, the place of Christ's death and resurrection.

12. This recommendation is made for the following reasons.

In regard to point a:

- (i) The church needs to be reminded of its origins, including the close link between the biblical Passover and the passion and resurrection of Jesus Christ—a link that reflects the total flow of salvation history. In the estimation of this consultation, a fixed date would obscure and weaken this link by eliminating any reference to the biblical norms for the calculation of Passover.
- (ii) Easter/Pascha has a cosmic dimension. Through Christ's resurrection, the sun, the moon, and all the elements are restored to their primordial capacity for declaring God's glory (Ps. 19:1-2, 148:3). Easter/Pascha reveals the close link between creation and redemption, as inseparable aspects of God's revelation.

The Nicene principles for calculating the date of Easter/Pascha, based as they are on the cycles of sun and moon, reflect this cosmic dimension much more fully than a fixed-date system.

(iii) In addition to underscoring many important symbolic aspects of the feast, a movable date for the observance of Easter/Pascha also indicates in palpable fashion the dramatic way in which the resurrection breaks into the comfortable routines of this world. While such a date may in some respects be less convenient than a fixed Sunday, it does call attention to a significant theological point which otherwise might be overlooked.

(iv) An earlier WCC consultation on the date of Easter/Pascha (Chambésy, 1970) observed, “In any case the churches should arrive at a solution for reasons based entirely on the religious meaning of the feast and for the purpose of Christian unity rather than for the purpose of satisfying inherently secular interests.” The present consultation wholly concurs with this sentiment.

(v) This recommendation maintains what, for most churches, is an important aspect of tradition. Adoption of a fixed Sunday approach would raise difficulties for many churches and, if introduced unilaterally by one church or group of churches, might well result in not two but three different dates for Easter/Pascha in a given year.

In regard to point b:

In recommending calculation of the astronomical data by the most accurate possible scientific means (as distinct, for example, from reliance on conventional cyclical tables or personal observation), the consultation believes that it is being completely faithful to the spirit of the Council of Nicaea itself, which also was willing to make use of the best available scientific knowledge. We are fortunate that experts in astronomy have already provided these necessary calculations; they are conveniently presented in *Synodica V*.⁴³

In regard to point c:

Astronomical observations, of course, depend upon the position on Earth which is taken as the point of reference. This consultation believes that it is appropriate to employ the meridian of Jerusalem, the site of Christ’s passion and resurrection, as this necessary point of reference for the calculation of the March equinox and the subsequent full moon.

13. The recommendation just stated will have some different implications for the churches of East and West as they seek a renewed faithfulness to Nicaea.

43. Secretariat pour la Préparation du Saint et Grand Concile de l’Elise Orthodoxe, *Synodica V* (Chambésy-Genève: Les Editions du Centre Orthodoxe, 1981), 133–49, https://apostoliki-diakonia.gr/gr_main/dialogos/SYNODHIKA_5.pdf (accessed 6 March 2025).

Both will face the need for education of their faithful. For Eastern churches, changes in the actual dating of Easter/Pascha will be more perceptible than for the Western churches. Given the contexts in which these churches live, this will require both patience and tact. For Western churches, on the other hand, the challenge may lie in communicating deeper aspects of the Nicene principles for the calculation of Easter/Pascha, such as those sketched above, and in acquainting their faithful with the concerns and insights of the Eastern churches.

14. The consultation is well aware of the particular circumstances of many Eastern churches. In some countries in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, where the Christian churches have lived with the challenge of other religions or materialistic ideologies, loyalty to the “old calendar” has been a symbol of the churches’ desire to maintain their integrity and their freedom from the hostile forces of this world. In such situations, implementation of any change in the calculation of Easter/Pascha will clearly have to proceed carefully and with great pastoral sensitivity.

15. To aid the churches in their discussion of the above recommendation, the consultation appends to this report a table of Easter/Pascha dates from 2001 through 2025, based on the astronomical specifications already indicated. For convenience of reference, the table also indicates the dates of Easter/Pascha according to the current Gregorian and Julian reckonings, the astronomically determined date of the first vernal full moon, i.e., the first full moon following the March equinox (see Ex. 12:18; Lev. 23:5; Num. 28:16; Deut. 16:1-2), and the date of Passover according to current Jewish reckoning.

Second recommendation

16. This consultation also recommends that the churches now undertake a period of study and reflection towards the goal of establishing as soon as possible a common date for Easter/Pascha along the lines set forth above. In the year 2001, the paschal calculations now in use by our churches will coincide. Together, Christians will begin a new century, a new millennium, with new opportunities to witness to the resurrection of Christ and to proclaim their joy in his victory over sin, suffering, and death. The unity that will be reflected as Christians celebrate Easter/Pascha on the same date will be for many a sign of hope and of witness to the world. This celebration of Easter/Pascha on the same date should not be the exception but the rule.

17. The way is now open for the churches to consider again their current practice for determining the date of Easter/Pascha. As a first step, in the interval between 1997 and 2001, this consultation encourages the churches to take up

consideration of the recommendations here proposed, and, if they find them acceptable in principle, to explore ways of implementing them according to their own procedures, in light of their own opportunities, and within their own contexts. This consultation suggests that during these years the churches consult with each other on the ways in which a common date for Easter/Pascha can be implemented. In this interval also, the present consultation encourages continuation of existing local and regional initiatives, as interim measures, for observance of a common Easter/Pascha.

18. As a second step, the consultation suggests that the year 2001 would also provide a good opportunity for the churches to review reactions and to assess progress made towards agreement on this matter. It recommends, therefore, that the WCC, in cooperation with its ecumenical partners and other Christian groups, organize a consultation in which this assessment could be reported and implementation could be discussed.

19. It is the sincere hope of the participants in this consultation that the churches will give an early and prayerful consideration to the recommendations made in this report, as a step towards preparing for a united witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Participants

- Dr Bert Beach, USA (for the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventists)
- Metropolitan Damaskinos (Papandreou), Switzerland (for the Ecumenical Patriarchate)
- Canon John Halliburton, United Kingdom (for the Anglican Communion)
- Rev. Fayiz Y. Henain, Syria (for the Evangelical Churches in the Middle East)
- Fr Datev Mikaelian, Syria (for the Armenian Orthodox Church)
- Archbishop Boutros Marayati, Syria (Armenian Catholic Church) (for the Middle East Council of Churches)
- Ven. Dr Koenraad Ouwers, Netherlands (for the Old-Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht)
- Msgr John Radano, Vatican City (for the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity)
- Mr Alexander Sologoub, Syria (for the Patriarchate of Moscow)

- Archbishop Dr Gunnar Weman, Sweden (for the Lutheran World Federation)
- Metropolitan Elias Yusef, Syria (for the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch)

Hosts

- Metropolitan Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim (Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch)
- Mr Razek Syriani (Syrian Orthodox Church / MECC)

Consultants

- Prof. John H. Erickson, USA (Orthodox Church in America)
- Rev. Dr Ronald Kydd, Canada (Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada)

WCC staff

- Fr Dr Thomas FitzGerald (Ecumenical Patriarchate)
- Rev. Dr Dagmar Heller (Evangelical Church of Germany, United)

Table of Easter/Pascha dates, 2001–2025

	Easter/Pascha by astronomical reckoning	Easter/Pascha by current Gregorian reckoning	Easter/Pascha by current Julian reckoning	Vernal full moon by astronomical reckoning	Passover by current Jewish reckoning
2001	15 April	15 April	15 April	8 April	8 April
2002	31 March	31 March	5 May	28 March	28 March
2003	20 April	20 April	27 April	16 April	17 April
2004	11 April	11 April	11 April	5 April	6 April
2005	27 March	27 March	1 May	25 March	24 April
2006	16 April	16 April	23 April	13 April	13 April
2007	8 April	8 April	8 April	2 April	3 April
2008	23 March	23 March	27 April	21 March	20 April
2009	12 April	12 April	19 April	9 April	9 April
2010	4 April	4 April	4 April	30 March	30 March
2011	24 April	24 April	24 April	18 April	19 April
2012	8 April	8 April	15 April	6 April	7 April
2013	31 March	31 March	5 May	27 March	26 March
2014	20 April	20 April	20 April	15 April	15 April
2015	5 April	5 April	12 April	4 April	4 April
2016	27 March	27 March	1 May	23 March	23 April
2017	16 April	16 April	16 April	11 April	11 April
2018	1 April	1 April	8 April	31 March	31 March
2019	24 March	21 April	28 April	21 March	20 April
2020	12 April	12 April	19 April	8 April	9 April
2021	4 April	4 April	2 May	28 March	28 March
2022	17 April	17 April	24 April	16 April	16 April
2023	9 April	9 April	16 April	6 April	6 April
2024	31 March	31 March	5 May	25 March	23 April
2025	20 April	20 April	20 May	13 April	13 April

Literature

- Biagioni, M. Chiara: “Pasqua comune. Pillay (Wcc): ‘Ogni decisione deve includere tutti, non può essere motivo di divisione’” [Common Easter. Pillay (WCC): “Every decision must include everyone, it cannot be a reason for division.”] *Società per l’Informazione Religiosa (SIR)*, 1 February 2025. <https://www.agensir.it/chiesa/2025/02/01/pasqua-comune-pillay-wcc-ogni-decisione-deve-includere-tutti-non-puo-essere-motivo-di-divisione/>.
- Borst, Arno. *The Ordering of Time*. Translated by Andrew Winnard. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993.
- Bradshaw, Paul F. “The Origins of Easter.” In *Between Memory and Hope: Readings on the Liturgical Year*, edited by Maxwell E. Johnson, 111–24. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000.
- Bradshaw, Paul F., and Maxwell E. Johnson. *The Origins of Feasts, Fasts and Seasons in Early Christianity*. Alcuin Club Collection 86. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011.
- Denysenko, Nicholas. *This Is the Day that the Lord Has Made: The Liturgical Year in Orthodoxy*. Cambridge: James Clarke and Co., 2024.
- Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity. *Ecumenical Relations with the Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate of Egypt*. <https://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-orientale/chiese-ortodosse-orientali/relazioni-bilaterali/patriarcato-copto-ortodosso-degitto.html>
- Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity. *The Bishop of Rome: Primacy and Synodality in the Ecumenical Dialogues and in the Responses to the Encyclical Ut unum sint. A Study Document*. Collana *Ut Unum Sint* 7. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticano, 2024. <https://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/documenti/altri-testi/the-bishop-of-rome.html>.
- Eusebius Caesariensis. *Vita Constantini*. 2nd edition. Edited by Friedrich Winkelmann. Corpus der Griechisch Christlichen Schriftsteller. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1992. [English translation: Philipp Schaff. The Life of the Blessed Emperor Constantine. Christian Ethereal Library]. https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0265-0339,_Eusebius_Caesariensis,_Vita_Constantini_%5BSchaff%5D,_EN.pdf.

- Fernández, Samuel, ed. *Fontes Nicaenae Synodi: The Contemporary Sources for the Study of the Council of Nicaea (304–337)*. Paderborn: Brill, 2024.
- Graf, Georg. *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur*. Volume 2. *Studi e Testi* 133. Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1947.
- Heller, Dagmar. “A Common Date for the Celebration of Easter.” In *Minutes of the Meeting of the Faith and Order Board, January 1996*, 119–32. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1996.
- Heller, Dagmar. “The Date of Easter: A Church-Dividing Issue?” *The Ecumenical Review* 48, no. 3 (1998): 392–400.
- <https://www.christianpost.com/news/coptic-orthodox-pope-tawadros-ii-suggests-one-easter-date-for-all-christian-churches-in-letter-to-pope-francis.html>.
- Kratchkovsky, I., and A. Vasiliev. *Histoire de Yahya-ibn-Saïd d’Antioche*. Volume 2. *Patrologia Orientalis* 23.3. Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1932.
- McCarthy, Daniel P. “The Council of Nicaea and the Celebration of the Christian Pasch.” In *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea*, edited by Kim Richard Young, 177–20. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.
- Mikhail, Arsenius. *For Our Salvation: Lectures and Readings on Holy Week in the Coptic Tradition*. Newport Beach: ACTS Press, 2023.
- Moshammer, Alden A. *The Easter Computus and the Origins of the Christian Era*. Oxford Early Christian Studies. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Nothaft, C. Philipp E. *Scandalous Error: Calendar Reform and Calendrical Astronomy in Medieval Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Ollila, Onerva, Asko Palviainen, and Minna Saarelma-Paukkala. *Ajan tasalla: Suomalainen kalenteri tänään*. Helsinki: Otava, 2019.
- Ossorguine, Nicholas. “Church Calendar.” In *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, 2nd edition, edited by Nicholas Lossky, 198–200. Geneva: WCC Publications, 2002.
- Pope Francis. *Homily of the Holy Father, Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls, 25 January 2025*. <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2025/documents/20250125-vespri-unita-cristiani.html>.

- Pope Francis. *Hope Does Not Disappoint: Bull of Indiction of the Jubilee of 2025*. Dicasterio per la Comunicazione – Libreria Editrice Vaticana. [English version: Published by The Word among Us Press, Maryland, 2025].
- Pope Francis and the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission. Final Document*. October 2024. https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2024-10-26_final-document/ENG---Documento-finale.pdf.
- Pope Paul VI and the Second Vatican Council. “Appendix: A Declaration on the Revision of the Calendar.” In *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy Sacrosanctum Concilium, Solemnly Promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on December 4, 1963*. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html.
- “Report on Consultation for a Fixed Date for Easter Organized by the Commission for Faith and Order.” *The Ecumenical Review* 23 (1971): 176–81.
- Swanson, Mark N. “Yaḥyā ibn Sa’īd al-Anṭākī.” In *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History, Volume 2 (900–1050)*. Edited by David Thomas and Alex Mallett, 657–61. History of Christian-Muslim Relations 14. Leiden: Brill, 2010.
- Piispainkokouksen lausunto. Asia 23. Kirkolliskokousaloite yhteisestä ortodoksisesta pääsiäisestä. [The Bishop of Rome. The statement of the Bishops’ Conference of the Orthodox Church of Finland on the date of Easter]. 2023. https://ort.fi/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Piispainkokouksen-lausunto-paasiaisen-ajankohdasta-kirkolliskokouksessa-2023_0.pdf.
- Talley, Thomas J. *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*. 2nd edition. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991.
- Weckwerth, Andreas. “The Twenty Canons of the Council of Nicaea.” In *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea*. Edited by Richard Kim Young, 158–76. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.
- World Council of Churches / Middle East Council of Churches Consultation. “Towards a Common Date for Easter.” World Council of Churches, 1997.

Zaimov, Stoyan. "Coptic Orthodox Pope Tawadros II Suggests One Easter Date for All Christian Churches in Letter to Pope Francis." *Christian Post Reporter*, 8 May 2014. <https://www.christianpost.com/news/coptic-orthodox-pope-tawadros-ii-suggests-one-easter-date-for-all-christian-churches-in-letter-to-pope-francis.html>.





**World Council
of Churches**

www.oikoumene.org



[worldcouncilofchurches](https://www.facebook.com/worldcouncilofchurches)



[@worldcouncilofchurches](https://www.instagram.com/worldcouncilofchurches)



[@oikoumene](https://twitter.com/oikoumene)



[wccworld](https://www.youtube.com/wccworld)

Religion/Ecumenism/Easter



9 782825 418840