

Keeping Easter with the Council of Nicaea

It would be folly to change course after 1,700 years, argues *Paul Nizinskyj*

This month marks the 1,700th anniversary of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea which, among other things, established a common formula for the date of Easter. The late Pope Francis and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople were due to commemorate this milestone by meeting in the ancient city, now İznik, Turkey. Both men were hopeful that, after 443 years of celebrating on (mostly) different dates, a shared observation could be restored between Catholic and Orthodox Christians – whose celebrations happened to coincide this year.

Such hopes are not new, and have been expressed many times; St Paul VI and Athenagoras I lifted the mutual anathemas of 1054 six decades ago. Real progress has proved elusive, however, and there seemed little to suggest this would change any time soon. However, in March, Metropolitan Emmanuel of Chalcedon, a senior hierarch in the Ecumenical Patriarchate, made a startling claim.

Speaking to the French weekly *Le Point*, he said: “As early as the 1970s, Paul VI had considered that Catholics adopt the Orthodox date as a sign of rapprochement. The project was often discussed and delayed. Last June, while I was in Rome for the feast of Ss Peter and Paul, at the end of the solemn Mass, after inviting me to wear the pallium, the insignia of primacy in Latin usage, Pope Francis whispered to me: ‘You will see, next year will have a great surprise in store for us.’ I understood that he was counting on the anniversary of Nicaea to announce his desire to put an end to this anomaly that harms both Christian sentiment and Christian witness.”

Could Rome really go back to an Easter calculation it abandoned as astronomically inaccurate more than four centuries ago? It is tempting to reject the question out of hand, but Pope Francis prided himself on being a great disruptor. He had also hinted at such a course before: in 2022 he told the Catholicos-Patriarch

of the Assyrian Church of the East, Mar Awa III, that, if there were agreement among the Eastern Churches, “we will go where you say.”

In any case, Constantinople appears to have wasted little time in acting on this encouragement. In September, having gathered all the bishops of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Patriarch Bartholomew announced that “the wish is unanimously expressed that the common celebration of Easter next year by Eastern and Western Christianity will not be a mere happy coincidence, but the beginning of the establishment of a common date for its annual celebration, in accordance with the Paschalion [the method for calculating the date of Easter] of our Orthodox Church.”

That same month, a similar resolution was adopted by a joint conference of the various Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches gathered in Egypt. Patriarch Bartholomew even directed his comments to Pope Francis at the opening of the World Policy Forum in December. “A real step towards repairing old conflicts,” he said, “is the call from the Ecumenical Patriarchate and our Modesty to the Roman Catholic Church and our elder brother His Holiness Pope Francis of Rome to go back to the Julian calendar for common Easter *computus*.”

However, despite Patriarch Bartholomew’s assertion that “There is no better way to honour the memory of the Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea”, the Orthodox Paschalion arguably does the exact opposite. To understand why, we must delve a little into what exactly they decided and how this was implemented.

The Nicaean formula for the date of Easter is both remarkably simple and painfully complicated. The bishops gathered by the Emperor Constantine in 325 agreed that Easter would be celebrated everywhere on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox, as was the practice at Rome and Alexandria. These astronomical phenomena

are significant because the spring full moon marks the beginning of the Jewish Passover and the Gospels tell us the Resurrection took place on the following Sunday.

But knowing exactly when they occur is not as easy as it sounds, not least because it depends where on the planet one happens to be at the time. As such, the Churches of Rome and Alexandria had each produced a complex Paschalion. This was intended to enable all Christians to celebrate on the same day, regardless of where they were or how well the lines of communication were operating at the time. However, the Roman and Alexandrian methods did not actually agree, meaning the respective dates for Easter could be up to five weeks apart; a now-familiar problem which persisted until Rome eventually adopted the more accurate Alexandrian calculus in 530.

This unity would endure until 1582, when Rome introduced the modern Gregorian calendar with its own Paschalion to correct the evidently astronomically inaccurate Julian one, which by that time was placing the nominal

date for the spring equinox – 21 March – about ten days after it had actually occurred. It also corrected the astronomically inaccurate Alexandrian lunar tables which were accumulating an error of one day every 310 years. Constantinople declined to adopt this scientific correction, however, and since then the two methods have led to their respective Easter dates falling anywhere between one and five weeks apart about three-quarters of the time.

This helps demonstrate why Patriarch Bartholomew’s optimism that “the Anglican Church and other Protestant denominations will also gladly adopt such an agreement” is so ill-placed. They will almost certainly reject it as unscientific, unscriptural and against the intentions of the Nicaean Fathers – all of which it is. And, if Rome were to re-adopt the Orthodox Paschalion, the resulting rupture in the celebration of Easter between Catholic Europe and Protestant Europe would be the perfect excuse for secular authorities to abandon the ecclesiastical holiday altogether and institute a secular Chocolate Bunny Day

on the Sunday following the second Saturday of April instead. We should not forget that in the UK an Act of Parliament to this effect was passed in 1928; it has simply never been enacted. Yet.

If Christianity wishes to retain its standing in the world as “rational worship” (Romans 12:1), and truly honour the intended legacy of the Nicaean Fathers, then it must move away from the unrevised Orthodox Paschalion, which is now so outdated as to be beyond repair, and once again follow the best empirical science available. Thankfully a blueprint for this, to which representatives of most of the world’s Christians have agreed, already exists.

This astronomically determined Paschalion, recording the spring equinox and Paschal full moon as viewed from the meridian of Jerusalem, was first proposed at the Pan-Orthodox Congress of Constantinople in 1923. In 1997 it was adopted by delegates of the World of Council of Churches at Aleppo representing Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Old Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans,

Pentecostals, Evangelicals and Seventh-Day Adventists, with the hope that it could be implemented once the Eastern and Western celebrations of Easter coincided in 2001.

It is disheartening that, almost a quarter of a century later, we seem further than ever from realising this vision. But the beauty of the Aleppo agreement is that it does not entail the triumph of one historical system over the other. Rather, it recognises that both fall short of the Nicaean ideal; the Gregorian date for Easter, for example, will fall out of sync with the astronomical reckoning no fewer than 12 times over the next century. Instead, it asks each Church to exercise humility in admitting the flaws in its own chosen interpretation of the Nicaean formula and honour the Nicaean Fathers with a more accurate one. Rome has done this twice in the last 1,500 years. To reverse course now would be pure folly. **CH**

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The first Ecumenical Council, St Sophia, Kyiv, c1700

