

A Single Date for Easter?

By Archbishop George Khodr

For a number of years I have heard Christians of different churches declare their agreement on a single date for Easter and they add that coming to such an understanding would unify them. My fear is that many are satisfied that there is no other difference between us than this. What is even more dangerous is that many go so far as to say that the dogmas which separate us are the work of theologians and that some bishops feel threatened by the loss of what people call their centers of power even though the churches are content for the Church in its unified state would not require the bishops to quit-- there are a tiny number of them in the world.

Thus my feeling that this rush for a unified date for Easter among some hides an attitude that depreciates the importance of dogmas and so goes beyond the issue of the feast, which is unquestionably at a lower level than the level of dogma.

The unity of Christian sentiments seems to me to be related to problem of Christian unity from the narrowest perspective or from the perspective of someone who is ignorant of the fact that there is a whole basket of disagreements that must be addressed together.

Disagreement over the dating of Easter was known in the second century when the Church was one. In Asia Minor, they celebrated it on the 14th of Nisan while in Alexandria and Rome it was on a Sunday. They worked in unity to establish a single date and arrived at it being on Sunday. They considered a unified date to be preferable, but the difference between the two dates did not constitute a schism.

Of what use has been a single date for the feast among the Catholic Church and the Protestant churches since their disagreements have remained intense for the past four hundred-odd years? In the 1920's, when the Armenian Orthodox chose the western date for Easter did they then belong to the west on the level of dogma? Of course not. What makes their choosing a common date for Easter with us difficult is their complete unity with the Armenian church in their mother country. The Armenians of Lebanon and the Arab East will not adopt a different date without consulting their mother church and for this reason our Armenian brothers will not be part of any unity for the date of Easter in Lebanon.

The rule for the timing of Easter was set down at the ecumenical council of Nicea in the year 325. It requires that we begin the calculation for Easter from the Spring Equinox that takes place on the 21st of March. Then we wait for the full moon that follows it. The Sunday after the full

moon is Easter. This ancient principle was confirmed by the ecumenical gathering that took place in Aleppo in 1997.

After Pope Gregory XIII corrected the Julian calendar in 1582-- a correction which was not accepted by the Orthodox Church—the Julian (Orthodox) 21st of March started to be different from the Gregorian 21st of March that was followed by most countries. So Catholics began to follow their March and to wait for their full moon to start their feast and the Orthodox 14th of March is now in this century 14 days after this and they await their full moon and their Easter is the Sunday after this.

So according to the movement of the moon we have two dates or one date for the feast. If the full moon follows soon after the Gregorian 21st of March, then the Orthodox have to wait until the next full moon to have their feast on the following Sunday and for this reason the Orthodox Easter can be far after from the Catholic one. However, if the full moon is far after the Gregorian Spring Equinox, then the feast is on a single day. The problem, then, is that the Catholics adopted the Gregorian calendar while the Orthodox are still on the Julian calendar which Rome abandoned in the time of Pope Gregory XIII.

It seems to me that if we held to the rule of the First Ecumenical Council—that is, the Spring Equinox then the first full moon—then the Orthodox must abandon the Julian calendar. This would require the mutual understanding of all the Orthodox churches in a general council or the exchange of letters between their heads. This appears difficult at the current time because, even if Orthodox decisions originate canonically from the heads of the churches, they tend the sentiments of their flocks. As far as I can ascertain, their sentiments do not seem to me to be very enthusiastic for change. They are composed of flocks and dioceses that are closer to holding to their heritage and who feel that the date of the feast is a part of this heritage. Our patriarchs and archbishops are not masters over their people in an absolute sense because of the system which coordinates between the clergy and the laity.

At this point in history, the Orthodox churches are enmeshed with ethnicities and in places like the Balkans, there has been bloodshed between Catholic ethnicities such as the Croats and Orthodox ethnicities. This is a grouping of different nations that are not prepared for change because they feel that sometimes it goes against dogma. You deal with peoples and not just with churches. Thus I do not anticipate a sudden change among the Orthodox peoples.

It remains that change, even if it is impossible at the present time, is possible on the regional level.

This is what Pope Paul VI thought in the 60's during the sessions of Vatican II when he allowed Catholic minorities living in countries with

an Orthodox majority to follow the Orthodox Easter, and this is what Catholic Christians do in Egypt and Jordan and Occupied Palestine. The Maronites of Lebanon studied this matter and they were almost at the point of celebrating Easter with the Orthodox after a meeting in Cyprus. I remember that their Patriarchate announced that they would consult Maronite people the about this question, but it appears that the patriarchate never undertook this consultation. Or they did and we don't know the result.

Then there appeared literature coming from some Maronite intellectuals claiming that the Maronites in Lebanon are not a minority and so Pope Paul VI's permission did not apply to them. The Orthodox patriarchate did not dispute this position. On the other hand, the opinion of many Orthodox was that Lebanon is not an ecclesial unit but rather that the unit is the Antiochene space. That is, one must consider all of the churches existing in the Antiochene space, Syria and Lebanon, together. If we adopted this principle then Pope Paul VI's guarantee applies and the Catholics of the region of Syria and Lebanon can celebrate Easter according to the Orthodox calculation.

And now we find ourselves at an impasse. On the international level it would be irrational for the local Orthodox (in Syria and Lebanon) to be divided in their celebration from the Russians and the Greeks in their various countries, the Bulgarians, the Serbs and others by choosing a Lebanese day for the feast.

There are many who call for a unified date for the feast in our regions. As I image it, the Orthodox say to the Catholics—"the bond brotherhood between us requires you to celebrate with us as you were given permission to do so. Understand, beloved, that if we say that we cannot separate ourselves in this matter from our brothers in the Orthodox world. You, on the other hand, are not leaving anything since the matter was decided by your first source of authority. No one's essential being is tied to the date of the feast and unity in a single date is considered by the people to be a concern about brotherly love. Let us then live this love on a region scale if we cannot live it now on the global level.