

1. RELIGIOUS CALENDAR: HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT

Within the Orthodox Church feast days and fast days are reckoned according to two distinct calendars, the Julian Calendar and the Gregorian Calendar. The first is attributed to the Roman Emperor Julius Caesar, whose name it bears. It was later corrected in the 16th century by Pope Gregory XIII due to the ever-increasing discrepancy between calendar time and calculated astronomical time. Thus the Gregorian Calendar came into being.

This is where the matter stood until the end of World War I. Until then, all Orthodox Churches had strictly abided by the Old (Julian) Calendar, which at present is 13 days behind the New Calendar long since adopted by the rest of Christendom. In May of 1923, however, an "Inter-Orthodox Congress" was convened at Constantinople where several of the Orthodox Churches, however, did eventually agree, though not all at the same time, to adopt the New Calendar. These were the Churches of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, Greece, Cyprus, Romania, Poland, and most recently, Bulgaria (1968). On the other hand, the Churches of Jerusalem, Russia and Serbia, along with the monasteries on Mt. Athos, all continue to adhere to the Old Calendar.

2. HOLY DAYS IN THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

The ecclesiastical year, which according to Byzantine practice begins on the first of September, is divided between movable and immovable or fixed holy days. The movable holy days are determined by the date of Easter - the most important of all feast days -, which is in a class by itself. The determination of the date of Easter was definitively regulated by the decision of the First Ecumenical Synod, held in Nicaea (325). Next in importance to Easter are the "twelve great feasts," of which three are movable. Eight of these feasts are devoted to Christ and four to the Virgin Mary. There are also a number of feast days of varying importance, most of which commemorate the more popular saints.

4. HOLY DAYS DEDICATED TO CHRIST AND THE VIRGIN MARY

The "twelve great feasts," as they occur in chronological order after September 1, are as follows:

The Nativity of the Virgin Mary	(September 8)
The Elevation of the Life-giving Cross	(September 14)
The Presentation of the Virgin Mary in the Temple	(November 21)
The Nativity of Christ (Christmas)	(December 25)
Epiphany or Theophany	(January 6)
The Presentation of Christ in the Temple	(February 2)
The Annunciation	(March 25)
Palm Sunday	(the Sunday before Easter)
The Ascension	(40 days after Easter)
Pentecost	(50 days after Easter)
The Transfiguration	(August 6)
Falling Asleep of the Virgin Mary (Assumption)	(August 15)

5. FAST DAYS AND FAST PERIODS

Four main fast periods observed during the ecclesiastical year are:

1. The Great Fast (Lent)--beginning on clean Monday 7 weeks before Easter.
2. Fast of the Apostles--varying in length from 1 to 6 weeks; it begins on a Monday, 8 days after Pentecost, and ends on June 28--the eve of the feast of Saints Peter and Paul.
3. Fast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary--August 1 to 14.
4. Christmas Fast--lasting 40 days, from November 15 to December 24.

Individual fast days include the feast of the Elevation of the Holy Cross (September 14), the Beheading of St. John the Baptist (August 29), and the eve of Epiphany (January 5), as well as all Wednesdays and Fridays. *There is no fasting, however, between Christmas and Epiphany, during the tenth week before Easter, the week after Easter and the week after Pentecost.*

Although the term denotes total abstinence from food or drink, fasting as practiced in the Orthodox Church means abstinence from meat, fish, dairy products, olive oil, and wine. The rules for fasting prescribed by the holy canons are quite rigid; and, although they are still observed in the monasteries and by the very devout, most Orthodox Christians today find it difficult to uphold the traditional practice for the length of time prescribed. Nevertheless, any deviation from the norm is permitted only following consultation with one's spiritual father or with the prior approval of the local hierarchy.

6. ORTHODOX EASTER

The determination of the date of Easter is governed by a computation based on the vernal equinox and the phase of the moon. According to the ruling of the First Ecumenical Synod in 325, Easter Sunday should fall on the Sunday which follows the first full moon after the vernal equinox. If the full moon happens to fall on a Sunday, Easter is observed the following Sunday. The day taken to be the invariable date of the vernal equinox is March 21.

Herein lies the first difference in the determination of Easter between the Orthodox Church and the other Christian Churches. The Orthodox Church continues to base its calculations for the date of Easter on the Julian Calendar, which was in use at the time of the First Ecumenical Synod. As such, it does not take into consideration the number of days which have since then accrued due to the progressive inaccuracy of the Julian Calendar. Practically speaking, this means that Easter may not be celebrated before April 3 (Gregorian), which had been March 21--the date of the vernal equinox--at the time of the First Ecumenical Synod. In other words, a difference of 13 days exists between the accepted date for the vernal equinox then and now. In the West, this discrepancy was addressed in the 16th century through the adoption of the Gregorian Calendar, which adjusted the Julian Calendar still in use by all Christians at that time. Western Christians, therefore, observe the date of the vernal equinox on March 21 according to the Gregorian Calendar.

The other difference in the determination of Easter between the Orthodox and other Christian Churches concerns the date of Passover. Jews originally celebrated Passover on the first full moon following the vernal equinox. Christians, therefore, celebrated Easter on the first Sunday after the first full moon following the vernal equinox. After the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. and the other tragic events, which gave rise to the dispersal of the Jews, Passover sometimes preceded the vernal equinox. This was occasioned by the dependence of the dispersed Jews upon local pagan calendars for the calculation of Passover. As a consequence, most Christians eventually ceased to regulate the observance of Easter by the Jewish Passover.

Their purpose, of course, was to preserve the original practice of celebrating Easter following the vernal equinox.

As an alternative to calculating Easter by the Passover, "paschal (Easter) cycles" were devised. The Orthodox Church eventually adopted a 19-year cycle, the Western Church an 84-year cycle. The use of two different "paschal cycles" inevitably gave way to differences between the Eastern and Western Churches regarding the observance of Easter. Varying dates for the vernal equinox increased these differences. Consequently, it is the combination of these variables, which accounts for the different date of Orthodox Easter, whenever it varies from the rest of Christendom.