



NEWS

Christian group claims progress on a common Easter

By BRADLEY S. KLAPPER, The Associated Press | 6:16 a.m. May 28, 2009



GENEVA — Christianity's largest ecumenical movement expressed hope Thursday that churches were moving closer to a common Easter for the world's Christians, despite a historical debate nearly as old as the religion.

Catholic and Protestant congregations will celebrate their belief in Jesus' resurrection on the same day as Orthodox churches in 2010 and 2011 because of a coincidence in the Julian and Gregorian calendars. The common holiday has happened three times this decade.

But the World Council of Churches says consensus is emerging that these should not just be occasional occurrences.

At a recent meeting in Lviv, Ukraine, theologians representing nearly the breadth of Christianity agreed in principle on a strategy for all the faithful to continue observing their feast together.

"It's not a problem of principle, of dogma or of doctrine," said Juan Michel, spokesman for the council, whose 350 Protestant, Orthodox and other churches represent more than 560 million Christians. It cooperates with the Roman Catholic Church, which is not a member.

"It's more of a pastoral issue for some churches," said Michel. "There are concerns how the faithful will feel if there is a change in the traditional way of calculating the date."

The confusion over Easter's historical date arose in the early days of Christianity as the faith spread and different groups interpreted the four Gospels in different ways.

According to Matthew, Mark and Luke's Gospels, the last meal Jesus shared with his disciples was the Jewish Passover meal, while John's Gospel says that Jesus died on the feast of Passover itself.

Christianity's leading authorities first sought to establish a common date in 325 at the Council of Nicaea, determining it as the first Sunday after the full moon following the spring equinox.

The problem before the advent of modern astronomy was calculating the equinox. Orthodox churches use March 21 in the Julian calendar, but since the 16th century the Western date has been derived in the Gregorian calendar. The resulting difference can be up to five weeks apart.

The council said theologians from the Vatican and various Orthodox and Protestant churches endorsed a compromise on May 15 that Easter should be held for all Christians using an equinox based on accurate astronomical data.

Under the plan the unified Easter usually falls as it would under the Gregorian calendar used by Catholics and Protestants, said Dagmar Heller, an ecumenical professor in Switzerland heading the council's faith and order commission.

In the next 15 years, the only time Western churches would have to change Easter is in 2019 from April 21 to March 24. The bigger adjustment would be for the Orthodox Church, which has experienced several schisms in its history over the question of dates.

"There are of course some fundamentalist Orthodox who say 'The Julian calendar is our tradition and it was used in Jesus' lifetime so we cannot change,'" Heller said, adding that some Eastern theologians might fear more breaks in their church as a result of a date change.

"And, of course, it's an issue because the astronomical data is closer to the Gregorian calendar, which was introduced by a pope," she said, referring to Pope Gregory XIII's reform of the calendar in 1582. It only slowly replaced the calendar named for Julius Caesar, who introduced it in 46 B.C.

Some Orthodox representatives at the meeting appeared to back the plan. French Orthodox theologian Antoine Arjakovsky acknowledged that the astronomy was closer to the Gregorian calendar, but noted that Catholic and Protestant churches were also compromising by "accepting that the date of Easter should be established on the basis of a cosmic calendar rather than by a fixed date."

The Vatican was represented in Lviv by the Rev. Milan Zust, an official of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

Heller said the proposed Easter calculation would be discussed by higher level officials from different denominations.

Christian groups have been trying for a century to establish a common Easter. In the 1920s some proposed a fixed Sunday as the date, but others opposed losing the theological link of the first Easter with Passover – which Jews still celebrate according to a lunar calendar.

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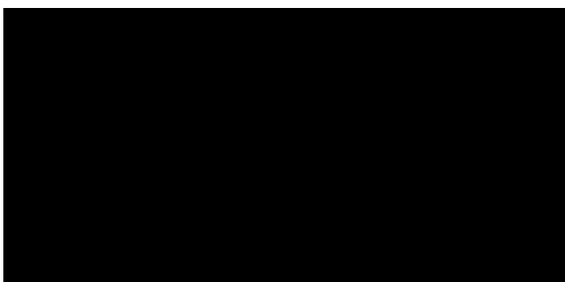
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