

The First Œcumenical Synod and the Feast of Pascha

“...not with the Jews”

by Archimandrite Sergius

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OF LATE, a number of Orthodox theologians and clergymen have contended that the proscription against celebrating the Resurrection of our Lord, Pascha (known in the Western world by the pagan term “Easter”), “with the Jews” is unknown and not, indeed, as the Orthodox Church has always taught, an actual decree of the First Œcumenical Synod convened in Nicaea in 325 A.D. This innovative claim is based on the argument that the Acts of this council have not been preserved and that the twenty extant Canons of the Synod do not mention the celebration of Pascha. In fact, however, in both the epistle of St. Constantine the Great to those Bishops who were unable to attend the Synod, as well as the letter sent by the Synod to the Church of Alexandria, there are relevant—albeit, indirect—data to be found in the specific agreements between the Synod and the Christians of the Eastern domains with regard to the common celebration of Pascha by all Christians. Unfortunately, theologians of an ecumenical bent have precipitated from the evidence offered by these sources a simple affirmation that all Christians must celebrate Pascha at the same time, ignoring the question of a specific day. Likewise, they intentionally distort the explicit prohibition of the first Canon of the Synod held in Antioch in 341—that is, *that the Christian Pascha must not be celebrated at the same time as the Jewish Passover*—, misrepresenting its original meaning: the expression “not with the Jews” is simply interpreted as an injunction against the calculation of the date for Pascha according to the faulty system employed by the Jews, at that time, for the calculation of their Passover. Such groundless arguments are those of the Very Reverend Professor L. Voronov, in his article, “Календарная Проблема” (“The Calendar Issue”) and of Professor D. Ogitski in an article entitled, “Канонические Нормы Православной Пасхалии” (“The Canonical Rules of the Orthodox *Paschalion*”) (both articles appear in the collection, *Богословские Труды* [*Theological Works*], published in Moscow and issued by the Moscow Patriarchate in 1971).

In keeping with such thought, Bishop Peter (L’Huillier) of Korsun (now Archbishop of New York [Orthodox Church of America]), in his report on

Pascha at an ecumenical conference held in Geneva (Chambésy) in 1977, “The Resolutions of the Synod in Nicaea Regarding the Concurrent Celebration of Pascha and the Passover and Their Contemporary Meaning” (published in French in *Вестник Западноевропейского Патриаршего Экзархата* [“Journal of the (Russian) Patriarchal Exarchate in Western Europe”], Paris, Nos. 93-96, 1976), maintains that the proscription against the common celebration of Pascha and the Jewish Passover “does not in any way refer to the casual coincidence of these two dates” (p. 78) and that “not until the Middle Ages did this idea arise, based on a literal but erroneous interpretation of the expression ‘with the Jews’ (μετὰ τῶν Ἰουδαίων).” His Eminence does not feel that “such a coincidence of Pascha and Passover contradicts the Church’s canonical prescriptions” and that the “Christian Pascha must *inevitably* follow the Jewish Passover” (p. 79). He cites as evidence of the “erroneous” application of the expression “μετὰ τῶν Ἰουδαίων” the canonist Zonaras’ interpretation of the seventh Apostolic Canon, which states that “their [the Jews’] non-festal feast (ἄνεορτος εὐορτή) must come first, and then our Pascha should be celebrated”; and the canonist Matthew Blastaris, who includes, among the other rules for the determination of the date of Pascha in his *Alphabetical Codex*, a ban against celebrating the Feast in conjunction with the Jewish Passover.

In response to Archbishop Peter, we might note that not only these late-Byzantine interpreters, but also several Fathers and ecclesiastical writers—contemporaries of the First Ecumenical Synod or men who lived shortly thereafter—explicitly testify to the decisions of the Holy Fathers at Nicaea, as regards the issue of celebrating the Christian Pascha on the same date as the Jewish Passover. We will, then, examine evidence and data from a number of these Fathers, first and preëminent among them, St. Athanasios the Great, a personal and active participant in the proceedings of the Nicaean Synod.

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In two of his epistles, St. Athanasios touches on the matter of the celebration of Pascha. In a letter to the Bishops of Africa (Chapter 2), he writes: “The Synod of Nicaea was convened on account of the heresy of Arius and because of the issue of Pascha. Because the Christians in Syria, Cilicia, and Mesopotamia were not in concord, *at the same time* (τῷ καιρῷ) *that the Jews celebrated their Passover*, they celebrated...[the Christian Pascha]... too” (Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. XXVI, col. 1029). In his letter “On the Synods in Ariminum and Seleucia” (Chapter 5), the Saint comments: “The Synod in Nicaea was held not without manifest reason, but out of good reason and urgent need; for the Christians of Syria, Cilicia, and Mesopotamia were erring with regard to the holy days and celebrated the Pascha with the Jews (μετὰ τῶν Ἰουδαίων ἐποίουν τὸ Πάσχα)” (*ibid.*, col. 688). It is evident from the context, here, that “μετὰ τῶν Ἰουδαίων,” *with the Jews*, means precisely what the Church has always taught; the expression refers to nothing other than a common celebration with the Jews *at one and the same moment in time* (τῷ καιρῷ). Moreover, it is this very *temporal* concelebration which invited reproach and which was one of the reasons for the convocation of a synod in Nicaea.

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St. Ambrose of Milan (*circa* 339-97), in an epistle written to the Bishops of the district of Emilia in 386, observes, in response to a question from them regarding the lateness of Pascha in the coming year (387): “The determination of the Feast of Pascha according to the teaching of Holy Scripture and the Holy Tradition of the Fathers who assembled at the Synod in Nicaea requires not a little wisdom. Aside from other marvelous rules of Faith, the Holy Fathers, with the aid of eminently experienced men appointed to determine the aforementioned Feast Day, produced a calculation for its date of nineteen years’ duration and established a cycle of sorts that became a model for ensuing years. This cycle they called the “*nonus decennial*,” its goal being...the sacrifice of the Resurrection of Christ at all places on the same night” (*Epistle XXIII*, Chap. 1, Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, Vol. XVI, col. 1070). The basic rule for the calculation of Pascha is set forth by St. Ambrose in the eleventh chapter of the same epistle: “We must observe a rule, such that the fourteenth moon [i.e., the fourteenth day of the month of Nisan, the Jewish Passover] be not set on the day of the Resurrection, but on the day of the passion of Christ, or on another preceding day, since the celebration of the Resurrection is celebrated on Sunday.” Further on, he justifies the rule in question by reference to the Feast of Pascha in 373 and 377, which fell on late dates: “Thus, in 373, when the fourteenth moon [that is, the Jewish Passover—*author’s note*] fell on March 24, we celebrated Pascha on March 31. Likewise in 377, when the fourteenth moon fell on April 9 (Sunday), the Pascha of the Lord was celebrated on the following Sunday, April 16.”

In essence, St. Ambrose confirms the correctness of the basic condition set by the “*Alexandrian Paschalion*” and universally accepted by the Synod in Nicaea: that *the Pascha of Christ must never coincide with the Jewish Passover* and that it must not only follow the Jewish Passover, but be celebrated on *Sunday*, at that.

In view of this clear statement by St. Ambrose in support of the nineteen-year Paschal cycle devised by the Holy Fathers at Nicaea, it is difficult to understand why Archbishop Peter, who *also* cites the foregoing passage from St. Ambrose’s twenty-third epistle, who acknowledges that the Saint “thought in this way,” and who even admits that “the Alexandrian cycle was used in Milan and in the Churches administered by that city,” nonetheless later writes, wholly inconsistently, that “the idea that the nineteen-year long Alexandrian cycle was confessed by the Fathers in Nicaea was only *bit by bit* introduced” (*ibid.*, p. 75).

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Another important source that confirms the basic rules for the calculation of Pascha is the collection of the *Paschal Epistles* of the Patriarchs of Alexandria, which were promulgated at the beginning of each year and in which the date for the next Pascha was announced. A great number of such *Paschal Epistles* have been preserved in the works of *St. Athanasios the Great* (in the period from 329 to 335) and in those of *St. Cyril of Alexandria* (during the years 414-442). Practically all of these epistles uphold the canonical proscription against celebrating Pascha “simultaneously with the Jews” and their Passover, since not a single of the Paschal dates listed coincides with the date of the Jewish Passover. Archbishop Peter is absolutely unjustified in his claim that in “the fourth century, after Nicaea, the Christian Pascha

and the Jewish Passover coincided several times” (*ibid.*, p. 79). In support of this false assertion, he cites the French scientist V. Grumel, who, in his essay “The Problem of the Date of Pascha in the Third and Fourth Centuries” (*Journal of Byzantine Research*, Vol. VIII, pp. 165-166), uses a table of Paschal and Passover dates, published by Swartz, for the nineteen consecutive years between 328 and 346. Only two of the dates in Swartz’s list are, in fact, Sundays, namely, 329 and 333. With regard to the first of these dates, 329, St. Athanasios designates April 6 as the date of Pascha, not March 30, as does Swartz. With respect to the year 333, St. Athanasios writes that the date of Pascha was moved back, in order to avoid its coinciding with the anniversary celebration of Rome. Again, aside from the two years mentioned, none of the dates in the table used by Archbishop Peter falls on a Sunday. Therefore, the “Paschal” dates on which he bases his arguments are fictitious!

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The late date of Pascha in 387 prompted St. John Chrysostomos, while he was still a Presbyter in Antioch, to deliver three sermons “Against the Jews” in the autumn of 386. Out of ignorance, many Christians in that city celebrated Pascha simultaneously with the Jewish Passover. On this account, they began Great Lent earlier than the correctly appointed time. In order to correct them, St. John Chrysostomos invokes the decree issued by the Synod in Nicaea in this regard: “More than three hundred Fathers, assembled in the land of Bythinia (at Nicaea), decreed this [that is, that Pascha must not be celebrated simultaneously with the Jewish Passover—*author’s note*], and you dishonor them in this way. You convict them either of ignorance, as if they were unaware of what they were appointing, or of cowardice, as if they knew the truth, but only by pretense, and betrayed it. This is the implication, if you do not respect their decree. Great wisdom and manliness are *evidenced in all of the Acts of the Synod*.... Beware, then, of what you do, for you are bringing accusation against a great many wise and manly Fathers. If Christ is found among the two or three [St. Matthew 18:20], all the more was He found among the more than three hundred, when they determined and established all of these things. Furthermore, you accuse not only them, but the whole *ecumene*, for it approved their decree. *Do you consider the Jews more intelligent than the Fathers who were assembled from every part of the inhabited world?*” (*Third Sermon Against the Jews*, Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. XLVIII, col. 865).

How forceful, indeed, are the words that St. John Chrysostomos uses to chastise the Christian “Judaizers,” and this not only for celebrating Pascha simultaneously with the Jewish Passover, but for “fasting with the Jews”—an infraction, incidentally, also explicitly forbidden by the seventieth Apostolic Canon: “Whosoever fasts with the Jews or celebrates with them...should be excommunicated!” Yet Archbishop Peter, when quoting St. John Chrysostomos’ homily on this specific issue (“To Those Who Fast Before it is Time”), maintains his silence with regard to the Christian “Judaizers,” and, indeed, at the very beginning of his article even notes that “...in these discussions, provoked by the peculiar Paschal practice of the Orientals, *no one accused them of being ‘Judaizers’*” [*emphasis mine*]!

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St. Epiphanius of Cyprus, a contemporary of St. John Chrysostomus, though a Jew by origin, denounces the Audiani, a heretical sect which flourished in his day, because they “wish to celebrate Pascha together with the Jews; that is, they essay to prove that Pascha should supposedly be celebrated *at the same time* that the Jews prepare their unleavened bread” (*Adversus LXXX Haereses*, Chap. 70, Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. XLII, col. 360). He argues that God revealed the truth of this matter to us “through two great acts, wrought by the pious and Ever-Blessed Emperor Constantine, who: 1) convened the Œcumenical Synod that established the Symbol of the Faith, composed in Nicaea and confirmed by the signatures of the Bishops gathered there; and 2) clarified, with their aid and for the sake of Christian unity, the issue of the dating of Pascha..., which was accomplished when the Bishops, gathered from everywhere, examined the issue in detail and unanimously decreed that Pascha should be celebrated in accordance with their ordinances.”

St. Epiphanius places particular emphasis on the ordinance concerning the prohibition of the concelebration of Pascha with the Jewish Passover: “The Holy Church of God...takes into consideration, not only the fourteenth day [of the month of Nisan], but the week—the cyclical repetition of a series of seven days—, as well.... The Church considers not only the fourteenth lunar day, but also the movement of the sun, so as to prevent the celebrations of two Paschas in the same year.... For, though we give attention to the fourteenth day, we pass beyond the equinox and then, further, assign the celebration of Pascha to God’s holy day, that is, to Sunday” (*ibid.*, Chap. 50, Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. XLI, col. 888).

St. Epiphanius continues: “Much could be said about how perfectly well the Fathers, or, more precisely, God Himself, through them, fixed for the Church the *correct and true celebration* of this loftiest and most holy Feast, such that it might be celebrated after the equinox and that we *not celebrate Pascha on the fourteenth day* [that is, not celebrate Pascha together with the Jews on their Passover—*author’s note*]”!

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Among the many Fathers who deal with the *Paschalion*, we should also mention St. Cyril of Alexandria, who wrote the following in an epistle to St. Leo, the Orthodox Pope of Rome: “Let us carefully examine what *the Synod in Nicaea* decreed with regard to the calculation of the fourteen moons of each month of the nineteen-year [Paschal] cycle; for at every [ensuing] synod, it has been decreed that no Church may do anything at odds with *the resolution agreed upon at the Synod of Nicaea about Pascha*” (Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, Vol. LIV, cols. 604-605).

The immediate successor of St. Cyril, the Holy Martyr St. Proterios (who was cruelly killed by the Non-Chalcedonians in 457), addresses the issue of the late date for Pascha in the year 455. He points out that, since in that year the Jewish Passover happened to fall on Sunday, April 17, Christ’s Pascha should be moved to the following Sunday, April 24, “in keeping with what our Fathers did” (Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, Vol. XLIV, col. 1089). St. Proterios means by “our Fathers,” here, the Holy Fathers of the Synod at Nicaea, about whom he later says: “When our most blessed Holy Fathers fixed the inviolable nineteen-year cycle [of the *Paschalion*], they established this very calculation not in accordance with the present-day ignorant and

ine devices of the Jews or according to the spurious wisdom of the Gentiles; the Holy Fathers were, rather, guided by the Grace of the Holy Spirit and carefully took into account the fourteen Paschal moons in the course of the aforementioned cycle of nineteen years” (*ibid.*, col. 1091).

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Some centuries later, St. Maximos the Confessor (†662) perfected the nineteen-year Paschal cycle by multiplying nineteen by twenty-eight (the period after which a specific calendar date returns to the same day of the week, that is, to a Sunday). His amplification of the Paschal cycle is known as the Great Indiction, a repetitive cycle of five hundred thirty-two years (that is, 19×28 , which = 532) comprising the dates for Pascha for each individual year.

In Chapter 14 of his noteworthy work, *A Short Clarification of the Redeeming Pascha of Christ our Lord* (Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. XIX, col. 1232),¹ St. Maximos likewise notes: “We who are, by Grace, vouchsafed to keep the Pascha of Christ, our Lord, with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth [I Corinthians 5:8], allow one day to elapse [in order to celebrate Pascha] when March 21 falls on a Saturday and that Saturday is the fourteenth day of the moon. If April 18 happens to fall on a Sunday, and that Sunday is, according to the Jewish calendar, the fourteenth day of the lunar month, then we allow seven days to elapse before celebrating Pascha. This is because, within the thirty-five days between March 22 and April 25, the redeeming day of Pascha is appointed to be celebrated, according to the canons, not before the former date or after the latter, by virtue of Church rules and the tradition concerning these dates.” The Alexandrian *Paschalion* abides by these same dates to this day, as well as the absolutely clear proscription, in St. Maximos’ comments, against the celebration of Pascha on the same day as the Jewish Passover.

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From all that we have cited here from the Patristic witness, it is obvious that the arguments put forth by Archbishop Peter and other authorities, with regard to the meaning of the canonical proscription against the celebration of the Christian Pascha simultaneously with the Jewish Passover, are spurious. There are two apparent reasons for the “scholarly” myopia of those Orthodox who would trifle with the Patristic rules for the celebration of the Paschal Feast. First, as is well known, the adoption of the Revised Gregorian (that is, Papal) Calendar by many Orthodox Churches in this century was motivated by ecumenical considerations: an attempt to standardize the celebration of the Christian Feasts at the same time throughout the Christian world. In this way, despite the doctrinal differences between the various Christian confessions, there would be created an impression of oneness, thus downplaying the real reasons for separation—that is, matters of belief and piety. Since part of the Orthodox Church now follows the Gregorian Calendar, it remains for the ecumenists to overthrow the Orthodox *Paschalion*, a major stumbling-block to ecumenical union. Hence, the artless but deceptive attempts by Orthodox innovators to chip away at the monolithic witness of the Fathers with regard to this issue, whether by purposeful misinterpretations of the Greek texts of the Synods which established the formula for dating Pascha, or by simply ignoring the Patristic witness.

Second, the ecumenist innovators seek not only to subjugate Orthodox

Christianity to Christian heterodoxy, but also envision an ecumenical world in which Christians and non-Christians *alike* will set aside their “differences.” Thus, they find anti-Semitic and antiquated our Orthodox objections to celebrating Feasts together with the Jews, whom we reckon not only to have rejected the True Messiah, but to have desired His death and to have harbored, over the centuries, a disdain for Orthodox Christianity. The innovators have bowed to advocates of “political correctness” and have been influenced by Roman Catholic theologians, who have clamored to vindicate the Jews from complicity in the death of Christ, eschewing thereby the clear words of Holy Scripture and the teachings of the Holy Fathers. *Our Faith is not, of course, anti-Semitic or based on the hatred of any people.* But it is founded on, and grounded in, a firm commitment to the uniqueness of Christ, the primacy of the Orthodox Church, and the absolute integrity of the Holy Traditions which the Apostles have passed on to us. It is unthinkable, then, that we should seek Festal unity independently of a common Faith; that we should celebrate our Feasts according to a calendar instituted by a “bishop” (the Pope of Rome) separated from the Orthodox Church; and that we should celebrate the Resurrection of Christ together with the Passover feast of those who not only reject the Messiah, but revile Him. So much, then, for innovation in the most important matter of determining the date of Pascha.

Notes

1. This essay, attributed to the “Monastic and Martyr Maximos,” though published in Vol. XIX of Migne’s Greek Patrology and not among St. Maximos’ collected writings in Vol. XC of that work, is nonetheless undoubtedly the work of the Confessor, as one can determine from a textual analysis of his other works.

APPENDIX

Paschasinus, Bishop of Lilybaeum [Marsala—*Ed.*] in Sicily, when asked by St. Leo the Pope of Rome about the late date for the celebration of Pascha in the year 444 (when the Feast fell on April 23, according to the Alexandrian *Paschalion*), responded in a letter that this late date was preferable to the earlier date appointed by the Roman *Paschalion*. In support of his argument, Bishop Paschasinus relates the following wondrous event, which took place in a Church in Sicily. The story is one which clearly indicates to us the supernatural and Divine character of the Church’s decisions regarding the Festal Calendar and, in particular, the celebration of the Feast of Feasts, the Holy Pascha of our Lord:

“In the high mountains, in the midst of thick forests, there was a very impoverished region by the name of ‘Meltinas.’ By strained efforts, a small Church had been constructed there. In the Baptistry, during the holy night of Pascha, at the time appointed for Baptisms, despite the fact that there were no pipes or aqueducts, let alone any water in the vicinity, the Baptismal Font would fill by itself. After the few present were sanctified [that is, Baptized—*author’s note*], the water would dissipate in the same way that it had appeared.

“In the time of the Blessed Pope Zosimas, however, when the Westerners were in error with regard to the calculation of the Paschal date, during the night of Pascha, having finished the lections, the Presbyter waited, as usual, for the time of the Baptism: waiting, indeed, until morning. Since the water did not appear, though, those waiting to be Baptized went home un sanctified [un-Baptized—*author’s note*].

“Continuing, let me say that during the eve of Pascha on the tenth calends of May [that is, on the correct date of April 22—*author’s note*], the Font filled with water at the appropriate time.

“Through this obvious miracle, it was proved that the Westerners were in error with respect to the date of Pascha” (Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, Vol. LIV, col. 609).