

TIME FOR A COMMON EASTER DATE?

The World Council of Churches (WCC) released a statement on 25 March 1997 entitled "The date of Easter: Science Offers Solution to Ancient Religious Problem," in which they suggest that "senior church representatives have come up with an ingenious proposal to set a common date for Easter."

The WCC statement was issued following the conclusion of a conference held in Aleppo, Syria from 5 through 10 March 1997 that had been convened under the auspices of the WCC and the Middle Eastern Council of Churches. Represented at the conference were consultants from the Roman Catholic Church, the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht, various European Protestant Churches, the Armenian Orthodox Church, the Syrian Orthodox Church, and the Orthodox Patriarchates of Constantinople, Antioch, and Moscow

According to the WCC statement, the conference in Aleppo asserted that the celebration of "Easter" on "different dates" in the Christian East and West gives a divided witness and compromises the credibility and effectiveness of the churches to bring the Gospel to the world, and thus they devised a formula for the common celebration of Christ's Resurrection.

To be honest, there is very little in common between the theologies of the heterodox western churches and that of the Orthodox Church. Therefore, it would be deceitful to celebrate "Easter" on the same date since this would imply that we have achieved a certain dogmatic agreement between them and us than actually exists.

What should the Orthodox response be? What does the patristic tradition teach us? The response of course is for the heterodox to return to historic, apostolic Orthodox Christianity and to celebrate Pascha in accordance with the decisions of the 318 God-bearing fathers of the First Ecumenical Council which took place in Nicaea.

So as to ensure uniformity in the Church, and thus to present an image of liturgical and dogmatic unity rather than chaos, these holy fathers determined that Pascha should be celebrated on the Sunday after the first full moon following the vernal (spring) equinox, and that, moreover, it must not coincide with the celebration of the Jewish Pascha (Passover) but must occur thereafter so as to preserve the order of the events during the week of our Lord's Passion.

It was the western churches that have deviated from this ancient tradition and it is thus imperative that they return not only to the original tradition of the Church in calculating the Paschalion but even further to return to the full teaching of the Orthodox Church so that there might be unity among those calling themselves Christians.

The WCC consultation and its resultant statement proposes that the Orthodox Church will agree to this new calendar calculation for the Paschalion. Any right-thinking Orthodox Christian will not fail to see that such a move would create a schism within the Church. The Old Calendarists unfortunately will seize that opportunity -as they always do- to create confusion amongst our faithful.

No reasonable person could possibly consider the proposal coming forth from Aleppo as being consistent with the traditional pronouncements of the Orthodox Church regarding the date of the Paschal Feast. The proposals made by the WCC conference are in fact an insult to the Orthodox people; derive from a simple-minded approach to a complex issue; base themselves on a deceptive misrepresentation of the provisions of the Council of Nicaea concerning the date of Pascha; and succeed in "pulling the wool over our eyes" in the name of condescending notions of ecumenical unity.

This proposed WCC notion concerning a common date for Easter and Pascha is a simple attempt to achieve a superficial unity among Orthodox and heterodox Christians, when in fact there are severe differences in dogma, doctrine, and matters of Faith that place us miles and miles apart from one another.

Many will surely call for adoption of this ill-conceived notion in the spirit of "Christian love;" the reality, however, is that love without truth is false just as truth without charity is a deception. True Christian love among brothers united in the faith will happen once the truth is proclaimed and acknowledged. Efforts to confound the tradition of the Church and to contradict the determinations of the Church Fathers are far from being honest or truthful and will result only in many divisions within the Church.

As Orthodox Christians embarked on a life-long struggle toward theosis, our love is exclusively for God and therefore for His way, and His truth, and His life. Love for others that denies divine truth, or which contravenes the way of Christ, is not genuine but disrupts our spiritual progress and leads others astray. Worse, this false love leads to a religion which aims at accommodation to the world and its

priorities - a religion foreign to the Faith of the Orthodox Fathers, which calls us from this world of darkness to the higher life of light.