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Science and faith meet on the date of Easter (Fr. John Parker)

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Science and faith so often are pitted against one another. The polarization does not come from one direction or the other alone, but rather often from both sides.

Many scientists claim that faith is simply a blind exercise in futility in which the «believer» seeks to impose some unintended meaning on his life, or to console herself with unprovable prayer. Most of these folks fail to recognize that science can never quantify or prove «love,» for example.

On the other hand, numbers of «faithful» claim that science is a sham, especially with regard to the heated debates about creation.

Most of these folks fail to understand, for example, that Genesis 1-11 is neither textbook science nor textbook history, and therefore have very little, if anything, to do with the number of «actual» days God took to make the Earth and everything in it.

The Christian faith has to do with the truth, and we Christians believe first and foremost that Jesus Christ is the truth. He said, «I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life» (John 14:6). For us, then, the truth is the most important quest, and facts, when we have them, contribute to that knowledge and understanding, and in and of themselves expose further the majesty of God, who is way beyond our grasp and comprehension.

But science and the Christian faith always have been related. At least in the West, science has been an incredible effort to find out how God's creation works and is ordered. With respect to the feast near at hand, most people, I think it is safe to say, are unaware that Pascha (Easter) is dated at least partially according to science – astronomy, to be more precise. When asked, «How do we know the date of Pascha?», some might even reply, «We ask Hallmark!»



In fact, Pascha is dated for scientific reasons, which tell theological truth. In the early days of Christianity, the Resurrection was celebrated in two differing ways. The first was the way of the Quartodecimans (a term which means «14-ers»). This group commemorated the resurrection of Christ on the day of the Jewish Passover, regardless of what day of the week that was. The Passover was celebrated on 14 Nisan, a date according to the Jewish calendar, established with Moses (see Exodus 12). Since Christians believe that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Passover, this feast was «Christianized» in this way. The second group celebrated Pascha on the first

Sunday after the Passover, since Jesus rose from the dead on a Sunday. So in this view, Sunday is the new Lord's day, on which Jesus conquered death. These two varying celebrations lasted until the fourth century, at least officially.

By the year 325, Emperor Constantine saw the church bombarded by various heresies, and the lack of a unified celebration of Pascha was a poor witness to the pagan world. So, at the First Ecumenical Council, a decisive meeting of all the bishops of the church, the universal dating of Pascha was established to be the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox -«Sunday,» with reference to the Resurrection and Lord's day, and «full moon after the vernal equinox» because this was the «Passover» moon. (The Jewish calendar was lunar; our present calendar is solar.) To this day, Pascha is calculated according to this reckoning.

Besides the scientific data used to calculate Easter, which are directly related to the biblical dating of the Passover, astronomy teaches very important theological truths, which are made evident in the Gospel reading for Pascha in every Orthodox church in the world on this feast of feasts: John 1:1-17.



1st Ecumenical Council

This Gospel lesson is read at Christ's resurrection with special reference to Jesus' eternal existence with the father and his being «the light.»

«The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world» (Verse 9),

and, «The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it» (Verse 5).

At Christmas, astronomically speaking, the «true light ... was coming into the world» as we celebrate the nativity of Christ just after the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year. Thereafter, light literally increases with each passing day, pointing to Christ, now increasing on the Earth from infant to man.

At Pascha, the darkness no longer overcomes the light. At the vernal equinox, day and night are the same length, and thereafter, each passing day contains more light than darkness. Consider the passage again in that light: «The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.»

As we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ, let us remember always how great God is! Indeed, the Scriptures show us the Word written, and «the heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork» (Psalm 19:1).

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