

# The Date of Orthodox Pascha in 2021

The Orthodox call this day Pascha. It is the most joyous celebration of the entire year, as the community gathers together to celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

## How is the date for Orthodox Pascha calculated?

In 325 AD the First Ecumenical Council established a unified observance of Orthodox Easter (*i.e.* Pascha). It decreed that Pascha would be held on the first Sunday after the first full moon occurring on or after the vernal equinox. March 21 is used as an approximation of the vernal equinox. Pascha is delayed by a week if the full moon is on Sunday.

## Why are Easter and Pascha on different dates?

While Pascha and the western Easter are both calculated using the same formula, the end dates often differ because they have different starting points. Orthodox Churches still use the Julian calendar as the starting point for the Pascha calculation.

While most Orthodox Churches adopted the modern Gregorian calendar, some retained the Julian. To maintain unity within the entire church, all Orthodox celebrate the feast of feasts on the same day throughout the world.

The old Julian solar calendar is 13 days behind the Gregorian's at the moment and its lunar calendar is four to five days behind, causing the date for Pascha to often fall on a different date to that of Easter.

While Pascha normally falls either one or five weeks later than Easter, on occasion they can be four weeks apart and on some years the dates of Pascha and Easter coincide. The dates coincided most recently in 2017 and the next coincidence will be in 2025.

## What caused the difference in the dates?

### History

According to the New Testament, Christ was crucified on the eve of the Jewish Passover (See John 19:14) and then shortly afterwards He rose from the dead. Because of this, the Christians have always commemorated Christ's resurrection around the time of the Jewish Passover. But, from the earliest days, there were differences in exactly how this was done.

At the very beginning of the Church's history, Christians of Jewish origin celebrated the resurrection of Jesus Christ immediately following the Jewish Passover festival, which, according to their Babylonian lunar calendar, fell on the evening of the full moon (which was the 14th day in the month of Nisan, the first month of the Jewish year — see Leviticus 23:5). By their reckoning, Pascha fell on the same date every year, but different days of the week (This is the same as it is for Christians today celebrating Christmas; it is always celebrated on December 25th, regardless of which day of the week it falls on).

Christians of Gentile origin, descendants of the Greco-Roman civilization, however, wished to always commemorate the resurrection of Jesus Christ on a Sunday, the day of the original resurrection and the first day of the week. According to their method, Pascha occurred on the same day of the week every year, always a Sunday, but from year to year it fell on different dates (Like today).

### **The clash in calendar dates**

The next question is, if the two calendars are 13 days apart at the moment, how was it possible for the date to be the same in 2004 but 34 days different in 2005?

It is a combination of things. The Orthodox Church uses the fixed date of 21 March *in the Julian calendar* in order to calculate the vernal equinox, while the Western church uses the fixed date of 21 March *in the Gregorian calendar* (The 21st of March in the “Old” Julian calendar is the equivalent of the 3rd of April in the Gregorian calendar until 2099, and then it becomes the 4th April from 2100).

Between 326 AD and 1582 AD Easter Sunday dates were based on the Julian calendar in use at that time. Pascha Sunday was defined as the Sunday following the Paschal Full Moon date for the year, using a simple “*19 Paschal Full Moon dates*” table of the “Old” Julian calendar. This was replaced in the Western Church in 1583 AD by a new larger (revised) “*Paschal Full Moon Gregorian dates*” table. The Eastern Church continues to use the 19 Paschal Full Moon dates table.

The current Easter calculations of Eastern and Western Churches use differing cycles of Ecclesiastical Full Moon dates and different tables, so we should not be surprised that the results frequently turn out differently.

In some years the Orthodox Easter Sunday does occur on the same day as the Western Easter Sunday. For example, this occurred in 2004 because the Western Easter Sunday date of April 11th, 2004 (Gregorian calendar) was the same day as the Orthodox Easter Sunday date of March 29th, 2004 (“Old” Julian calendar). In most years however, Orthodox Easter follows Western Easter by one or more weeks, but for some years there are wider gaps. Year by year, Orthodox Pascha moves back and forth between its earliest date on April 4th and its latest date on May 8th - as set by the rule of the Council of Nicaea in 325AD using the “Old” Julian Calendar. The Western Easter also moves back and forth, between its earliest date of March 22nd and its latest date of April 25th, but the two movements are not always together. There is an unusually wide gap when the Western Easter falls at an early date in its cycle, while the Orthodox date falls late in its cycle.

All Christians are united in their desire to commemorate the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Until the Church can sort out the variations that have arisen over the centuries, we must show love to one another, while praying for the day when there will be a common celebration for all Christians and a united witness to those outside the Church.