

0325-0325 – Concilium Nicaenum I – On The Keeping Of Easter

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elect them, and that the bishop of Alexandria shall concur in the election and ratify it. This concession has been made to all the rest; but, on account of his disorderly conduct from the first, and the rashness and precipitation of his character, the same decree was not made concerning Meletius himself, but that, inasmuch as he is a man capable of committing again the same disorders, no authority nor privilege should be conceded to him.

These are the particulars, which are of special interest to Egypt and to the most holy Church of Alexandria; but if in the presence of our most honoured lord, our colleague and brother Alexander, anything else has been enacted by canon or other decree, he will himself convey it to you in greater detail, he having been both a guide and fellow-worker in what has been done.

We further proclaim to you the good news of the agreement concerning the holy Easter, that this particular also has through your prayers been rightly settled; so that all our brethren in the East who formerly followed the custom of the Jews are henceforth to celebrate the said most sacred feast of Easter at the same time with the Romans and yourselves and all those who have observed Easter from the beginning.

Wherefore, rejoicing in these wholesome results, and in our common peace and harmony, and in the cutting off of every heresy, receive ye with the greater honour and with increased love, our colleague your Bishop Alexander, who has gladdened us by his presence, and who at so great an age has undergone so great fatigue that peace might be established among you and all of us. Pray ye also for us all, that the things which have been deemed advisable may stand fast; for they have been done, as we believe, to the well-pleasing of Almighty God and of his only Begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Ghost, to whom be glory for ever. Amen.

On the Keeping of Easter.

From the Letter of the Emperor to all those not present at the Council.

(*Found in Eusebius, Vita Const., Lib. iii., 18–20.*)

When the question relative to the sacred festival of Easter arose, it was universally thought that it would be convenient that all should keep the feast on one day; for what could be more beautiful and more desirable, than to see this festival, through which we receive the hope of immortality, celebrated by all with one accord, and in the same manner? It was declared to be particularly unworthy for this, the holiest of all festivals, to follow the custom [the calculation] of the Jews, who had soiled their hands with the most fearful of crimes, and whose minds were blinded. In rejecting their custom,¹¹³ we may transmit to our descendants the legitimate mode of celebrating Easter, which we have observed from the time of the Saviour's Passion to the present day [according

¹¹³ We must read ἔθους, not ἔθνους, as the Mayence impression of the edition of Valerius has it.

to the day of the week]. We ought not, therefore, to have anything in common with the Jews, for the Saviour has shown us another way; our worship follows a more legitimate and more convenient course (the order of the days of the week); and consequently, in unanimously adopting this mode, we desire, dearest brethren, to separate ourselves from the detestable company of the Jews, for it is truly shameful for us to hear them boast that without their direction we could not keep this feast. How can they be in the right, they who, after the death of the Saviour, have no longer been led by reason but by wild violence, as their delusion may urge them? They do not possess the truth in this Easter question; for, in their blindness and repugnance to all improvements, they frequently celebrate two passovers in the same year. We could not imitate those who are openly in error. How, then, could we follow these Jews, who are most certainly blinded by error? for to celebrate the passover twice in one year is totally inadmissible. But even if this were not so, it would still be your duty not to tarnish your soul by communications with such wicked people [the Jews]. Besides, consider well, that in such an important matter, and on a subject of such great solemnity, there ought not to be any division. Our Saviour has left us only one festal day of our redemption, that is to say, of his holy passion, and he desired [to establish] only one Catholic Church. Think, then, how unseemly it is, that on the same day some should be fasting whilst others are seated at a banquet; and that after Easter, some should be rejoicing at feasts, whilst others are still observing a strict fast. For this reason, a Divine Providence wills that this custom should be rectified and regulated in a uniform way; and everyone, I hope, will agree upon this point. As, on the one hand, it is our duty not to have anything in common with the murderers of our Lord; and as, on the other, the custom now followed by the Churches of the West, of the South, and of the North, and by some of those of the East, is the most acceptable, it has appeared good to all; and I have been guarantee for your consent, that you would accept it with joy, as it is followed at Rome, in Africa, in all Italy, Egypt, Spain, Gaul, Britain, Libya, in all Achaia, and in the dioceses of Asia, of Pontus, and Cilicia. You should consider not only that the number of churches in these provinces make a majority, but also that it is right to demand what our reason approves, and that we should have nothing in common with the Jews. To sum up in few words: By the unanimous judgment of all, it has been decided that the most holy festival of Easter should be everywhere celebrated on one and the same day, and it is not seemly that in so holy a thing there should be any division. As this is the state of the case, accept joyfully the divine favour, and this truly divine command; for all which takes place in assemblies of the bishops ought to be regarded as proceeding from the will of God. Make known to your brethren what has been decreed, keep this most holy day according to the prescribed mode; we can thus celebrate this holy Easter day at the same time, if it is granted me, as I desire, to unite myself with you; we can rejoice together, seeing that the divine power has made use of our instrumentality for destroying the evil designs of the devil, and thus causing faith, peace, and unity to flourish amongst us. May God graciously protect you, my beloved brethren.

Excursus on the Subsequent History of the Easter Question.

(Hefele: *Hist. of the Councils*, Vol. I., pp. 328 *et seqq.*)

The differences in the way of fixing the period of Easter did not indeed disappear after the Council of Nicea. Alexandria and Rome could not agree, either because one of the two Churches neglected to make the calculation for Easter, or because the other considered it inaccurate. It is a fact, proved by the ancient Easter table of the Roman Church, that the cycle of eighty-four years continued to be used at Rome as before. Now this cycle differed in many ways from the Alexandrian, and did not always agree with it about the period for Easter—in fact (a), the Romans used quite another method from the Alexandrians; they calculated from the epact, and began from the *feria prima* of January. (b.) The Romans were mistaken in placing the full moon a little too soon; whilst the Alexandrians placed it a little too late. (c.) At Rome the equinox was supposed to fall on March 18th; whilst the Alexandrians placed it on March 21st. (d.) Finally, the Romans differed in this from the Greeks also; they did not celebrate Easter the next day when the full moon fell on the Saturday.

Even the year following the Council of Nicea—that is, in 326—as well as in the years 330, 333, 340, 341, 343, the Latins celebrated Easter on a different day from the Alexandrians. In order to put an end to this misunderstanding, the Synod of Sardica in 343, as we learn from the newly discovered festival letters of S. Athanasius, took up again the question of Easter, and brought the two parties (Alexandrians and Romans) to regulate, by means of mutual concessions, a common day for Easter for the next fifty years. This compromise, after a few years, was not observed. The troubles excited by the Arian heresy, and the division which it caused between the East and the West, prevented the decree of Sardica from being put into execution; therefore the Emperor Theodosius the Great, after the re-establishment of peace in the Church, found himself obliged to take fresh steps for obtaining a complete uniformity in the manner of celebrating Easter. In 387, the Romans having kept Easter on March 21st, the Alexandrians did not do so for five weeks later—that is to say, till April 25th—because with the Alexandrians the equinox was not till March 21st. The Emperor Theodosius the Great then asked Theophilus, Bishop of Alexandria for an explanation of the difference. The bishop responded to the Emperor's desire, and drew up a chronological table of the Easter festivals, based upon the principles acknowledged by the Church of Alexandria. Unfortunately, we now possess only the prologue of his work.

Upon an invitation from Rome, S. Ambrose also mentioned the period of this same Easter in 387, in his letter to the bishops of Æmilia, and he sides with the Alexandrian computation. Cyril of Alexandria abridged the paschal table of his uncle Theophilus, and fixed the time for the ninety-five following Easters—that is, from 436 to 531 after Christ. Besides this Cyril showed, in a letter to the Pope, what was defective in the Latin calculation; and this demonstration was taken up again, some time after, by order of the Emperor, by Paschasinus, Bishop of Lilybæum and Proterius of Alexandria, in a letter written by them to Pope Leo I. In consequence of these

communications, Pope Leo often gave the preference to the Alexandrian computation, instead of that of the Church of Rome. At the same time also was generally established, the opinion so little entertained by the ancient authorities of the Church—one might even say, so strongly in contradiction to their teaching—that Christ partook of the passover on the 14th Nisan, that he died on the 15th (not on the 14th, as the ancients considered), that he lay in the grave on the 16th, and rose again on the 17th. In the letter we have just mentioned, Proterius of Alexandria openly admitted all these different points.

Some years afterwards, in 457, Victor of Aquitane, by order of the Roman Archdeacon Hilary, endeavoured to make the Roman and the Alexandrian calculations agree together. It has been conjectured that subsequently Hilary, when Pope, brought Victor's calculation into use, in 456—that is, at the time when the cycle of eighty-four years came to an end. In the latter cycle the new moons were marked more accurately, and the chief differences existing between the Latin and Greek calculations disappeared; so that the Easter of the Latins generally coincided with that of Alexandria, or was only a very little removed from it. In cases when the id' fell on a Saturday, Victor did not wish to decide whether Easter should be celebrated the next day, as the Alexandrians did, or should be postponed for a week. He indicates both dates in his table, and leaves the Pope to decide what was to be done in each separate case. Even after Victor's calculations, there still remained great differences in the manner of fixing the celebration of Easter; and it was Dionysius the Less who first completely overcame them, by giving to the Latins a paschal table having as its basis the cycle of nineteen years. This cycle perfectly corresponded to that of Alexandria, and thus established that harmony which had been so long sought in vain. He showed the advantages of his calculation so strongly, that it was admitted by Rome and by the whole of Italy; whilst almost the whole of Gaul remained faithful to Victor's canon, and Great Britain still held the cycle of eighty-four years, a little improved by Sulpicius Severus. When the Heptarchy was evangelized by the Roman missionaries, the new converts accepted the calculation of Dionysius, whilst the ancient Churches of Wales held fast their old tradition. From this arose the well-known British dissensions about the celebration of Easter, which were transplanted by Columban into Gaul. In 729, the majority of the ancient British Churches accepted the cycle of nineteen years. It had before been introduced into Spain, immediately after the conversion of Reccared. Finally, under Charles the Great, the cycle of nineteen years triumphed over all opposition; and thus the whole of Christendom was united, for the Quartodecimans had gradually disappeared.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ It is curious that after all the attempts that have been made to get this matter settled, the Church is still separated into East and West—the latter having accepted the Gregorian Calendar from which the Eastern Church, still using the Julian Calendar, differs in being twelve days behind. And even in the West we have succeeded in breaking the spirit of the Nicene decree, for in 1825 the Christian Easter coincided with the Jewish Passover!