

# THE JULIAN CALENDAR

## In Response to the Misapprehensions of Nicolas Ossorgin

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The following article first appeared in *Orthodox Tradition* in 1991 (Vol. XIII, No. 3). It is reprinted here in response to inquiries about Professor Ossorgin's faulty views with regard to the calendar issue and related astronomical facts, which views have appeared of late in several ecumenical journals.

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IN A PROVOCATIVE and interesting article recently published in England ("Thoughts on the Liturgical Calendar," *Sourozh*, No. 28, May 1987, pp. 41-52), Nicolas Ossorgin (Ossorguine), a Professor at the St. Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris, makes some astonishingly naïve and unscientific statements about the use of the Julian Calendar in the Orthodox Church. His final conclusion in this short treatise, that those Orthodox Churches using the Julian Calendar are in "defiance" of the Church and lack an "understanding of her Tradition," is not only irresponsible but can lead those less sophisticated in Patristic studies to unwarranted conclusions. I wish here, then, to point out some of Professor Ossorgin's errors in understanding the Patristic Tradition and to correct his misapprehensions about Orthodox cosmology and liturgical theology.

Let us first say that the vast majority of the Orthodox Churches, in keeping with a tradition that dates to the foundation of the Church, use the Old or Julian Calendar in calculating the festal year. New Calendarist innovators often forget this, relegating the majority of the Church to a minority status more appropriate to the innovators themselves. One might more rightly call the New Calendar innovation an act of defiance against the Church, if only because it is, by virtue of being an innovation, wholly inconsistent with the historical development of the Church, Church Canons, and prevailing usage. It is not unusual for the Church to condemn as defiance that which violates her established practices. To accuse the majority of the Church of defiance for following that which has endured for centuries, however, is to suggest a new standard of authenticity. It also implies that current practice and its harmony with practice over time are not

signs of Holy Tradition and the action of the Holy Spirit, as our traditional theology affirms, but adventitious circumstances subject to error and human fallibility.

Change does occur in the Orthodox Church, and Holy Tradition is not static. However, changes which occur in the Church occur over time, are always consistent with previous practice, and do not in any event overturn centuries of established practice—here, indeed, nearly two millennia of practice—for something that renders past tradition a matter of "defiance" towards the Church. Thinking which ignores the unity of Holy Tradition is thinking similar to that which inspires the renovationism that comes forth from those who have no respect for or understanding of the sanctity and internal unity of Holy Tradition as it has developed over time with Divine guidance.

When Professor Ossorgin suggests that the majority of the Orthodox Church today stands in defiance of her own traditions because of its adherence to the Julian Calendar, he also strikes a virtual blow—one would hope, unwittingly—against the very nature of the Orthodox Church's claim to primacy: that her established traditions are nothing less than the legacies of the Apostolic Church. The kind of presumptuous scholarship found in his article is symptomatic of the trend among many innovative Orthodox writers to forget that we "theologize" from within the Church, bound by her common experience and Divine *oikonomia*, and not from atop theoretical stilts which, while they may make us appear greater than the Church herself, often simply expose the paucity and smallness of our grasp of ecclesiastical reality.

The common experience of the Church calls us to a pious attitude towards all that she has bequeathed us. A "hermeneutics of suspicion," which leads us to imagine that the majority of Orthodox believers—not to mention the dedicated traditionalists who have launched movements of resistance in the name of the Church Calendar—stand in defiance of the Church and her understanding of Holy Tradition, is a hermeneutic approach foreign to this attitude. When St. John Chrysostomos calls us to study Church matters, he tells us that we must do so in a pious way. Of Holy Tradition he characteristically says, "It is tradition, seek no more." And though we have created a theology of Holy Tradition with large and small "t"s, no Patristic source ever makes such a distinction. Treating the Church calendar as a secondary tradition, assigning those loyal to it to a place of defiance, and approaching Holy Tradition with a spirit of suspicion—these devices are outside the attitude of piety which must

guide us in our scholarly study of the Church.

With regard to the calendar itself, Professor Ossorgin's comments are astonishing only because they show such a lack of familiarity with the calendar issue, a shortcoming which he shares with most modernistic theologians in our time. He fails to understand that the Fathers of the Church were quite aware of the inaccuracies of the Julian Calendar. His claim, then, that the Fathers of Nicaea would have rejected the use of the Old Calendar today, since it moves the Feast of Pascha thirteen or more days away from the spring equinox, is absurd, unless one believes that the Fathers of Nicaea were singularly authoritative and that the considerations of the Fathers who followed them—at least with regard to the calendar—are of no significance or somehow inconsistent with Nicaea. Indeed, the Fathers who convened Church Councils in 1583, 1587, and 1593 and local Church Synods in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to condemn the calendar of Pope Gregory were perfectly aware of the deviation of the Julian (*and* Gregorian Calendar, we might add) from astronomical exactitude, since in their own days the spring equinox by the Julian calendar was at least eleven days behind the actual equinox.

Furthermore, the notion that the celebration of Pascha must correspond to a time when daylight hours surpass those of darkness—something compromised by the removal of Pascha from the actual spring equinox by the inaccuracy of the Julian Calendar—is a minor issue in the calculation of Pascha. It is true, as Ossorgin contends, that Pascha represents the triumph of light over darkness and is symbolized by the spring equinox, when daylight hours begin to outnumber night hours. Though *he* quotes only an anonymous source to establish this, evidence of such symbolism can be found in other Patristic writings. However, this symbolism is neither the most important element in the fixing of the Paschal Feast nor a precise one. Physical and literal symbolism in the Church *never compromise* metaphor. Pascha celebrates the metaphysical and ontological victory of light over darkness, and this fact, *not something physical*, dominates in the symbolism and metaphor of the Church.

We might also note that Ossorgin's overstatement of the significance of the temporal event of the spring equinox is a rather naive one. He attributes to the spring equinox a kind of "cosmic reality" which is inconsistent with the cosmology of the Orthodox Church. Human time and even the order of our physical universe belong to fallen man. They are not to be confused with a "cosmic reality" of ontological dimensions. This is rather obvious in the fact that the spring

equinox has no *universal* dimensions in the calculation of Pascha, since the lengthening of daylight hours with which it is associated *does not occur in the Southern Hemisphere*, where the opposite occurs. Moreover, we must, as we noted above, keep in mind that the symbol of the triumph of light over darkness is not perfectly represented by the spring equinox, since a date for Pascha calculated by the Gregorian Calendar must also fall at least a few days away from the actual moment of its occurrence. Those who follow the Julian Calendar are, in fact, simply farther into the phenomenon of the celestial or astronomical triumph of light over darkness—and again, only in the Northern Hemisphere!

In terms of liturgical theology, "cosmic" reality exists in a new time, in Divine time, in the time of the eternal "now." It is for this reason that the Feast of the Transfiguration, for example, occurs wholly outside the temporal sequence of events in Christ's life. It occurs where it does because of a certain consistency with liturgical "time," which again rises above physical time. The Feast of Pascha, too, exists in "eternal time" and is not fixed to physical phenomena, whether they be the *exact moment* of the spring equinox or the budding of trees and plants.

A superb illustration of the fact that Divine time and the time of our secular calendar are not in accord—and, indeed, that the Old Calendar against which Ossorgin argues is, in fact, more closely aligned with events in the eternal realm, or "cosmic reality," than he imagines—is the following account of the death of a modern Greek Saint, Savvas the New, who, though an Old Calendar sympathizer, celebrated on the New Calendar and died within the New Calendarist State Church of Greece:

About him at that time were a few nuns. They were in the presence of a holy personage, an admirable athlete of the faith and of piety, a citizen of Paradise. Heaven knew of his departure from earth and celebrated. By Divine dispensation, one of the nuns saw the soul of Saint Savvas ascending to heaven in the midst of a golden cloud, and as a triumpher in life chanting with a most sweet voice: 'Announce, O earth, great joy.' It was the eve before the Feast of the Annunciation according to the Old Calendar, and the Churches which follow it had begun celebrating the glorious day of the Theotokos, whom the Saint greatly revered. (See Constantine Cavarnos, *St. Savvas the New*, Vol. VIII, in *Modern Orthodox Saints* [Belmont, MA: Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 1985].)

Similar evidence of the mystical relationship between cosmic reality and the Old Calendar was the appearance of a Byzantine Cross in the skies above a small Church in a suburb of Athens in 1925. The

Feast of the Elevation of the Holy Cross was being observed by traditionalist believers, despite a ban throughout Greece on any observance of Church Holy Days according to the Old Calendar. Even the military police gathered to stop the services were overwhelmed by the miracle, which was reported amidst consternation in the press the next day.

Finally, Holy Tradition is expressed in the unity of Church history, Church Canons, and the Patristic consensus. The Apostolic and other Canons clearly state that the calculation of Pascha according to the current formula was established to foster uniformity in the Church and not to honor "hours and days." We cannot dismiss the Church's stipulation that the Pascha may not be celebrated with the Jews by playing games with "seminary Greek." We cannot justify the celebration of Pascha with the Jews or before the Jewish Passover (a deviation from common practice which *did occur* in the Early Church) by ignoring extant Canons which forbid the celebration of Pascha on the first Sunday after the spring equinox, if that Sunday happens to coincide with the Jewish Passover, or before the Jewish Passover—Canons which have as their purpose the elimination of variant practices! Nor can we dismiss the Julian Calendar because, ignoring its unity with Church Canons and practice, it does not correspond to an imperfect symbolism drawn from a physical phenomenon in the fallen world!

The rubrics of political ecumenism demand that we forego any assumption of Divine guidance in the traditional practices of our Church. Innovators have begun to ignore their deviations from Church Tradition and attack the ancient traditions of our Church as though *they* were innovations or errors. If we throw out the Julian Calendar and calculate Pascha according to another calendar, then our distinctive identity as Orthodox will be lost. We will celebrate Christmas with Santa and Pascha with the Easter bunny. Or, more to the point, we will celebrate, rather than the Feast of Feasts, the Easter of Western Christendom together with the heterodox. The victory of Christ over death will bow to the victory of ecumenical politics over the Orthodox Church. That such an impossible victory should be served by the compromising scholarship of modernist Orthodox theologians is a thought which should cause us all to reflect at great length on the forces which are working from within our Church for her destruction and degradation. It is the pity of our age that wily ideas come at a time when so few really know their Faith and that ecumenical nonsense can pretend to challenge the truth.