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The Liturgical Year 2008: A Year to Remember?

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Abstract

In late 2007 there were Press accounts drawing attention to the transfer the next year of the celebration of St Patrick's Day to Saturday March 15th. For all its strengths, the Roman Liturgical Calendar for any single year is not as uniform or regular as many may presume or expect. There are many variable factors, most prominently the so called Moveable Feasts which are mostly connected with the cycles of the moon but need to be tied to a calendar date set by the sun. This means the date of Easter 2008 (March 23) is the earliest in 2008 years and won't happen again for another 200 years.

In the planning of the preparation of the Liturgical Calendar, Rome published in *Notitiae* arrangements for certain feast days that would be impacted by the unusually early Easter. In detail the changes affected feast days in March which were transferred to other days so as to protect the integrity of the celebration of Holy Week and the Easter Octave as special times. In practice, this meant St Patrick's Day is to be celebrated on March 15th, St Joseph on March 14th, and the Annunciation on March 31st. Coming from another angle, some calendar feasts happen to fall on a Sunday in 2008. Thus Epiphany is celebrated on January 6th being a Sunday and not the nearest Sunday to the 6th.

Introduction

We have all had many occasions to query the accuracy of the secular daily press and their handling of Church affairs in ways that do not fully respect the complexity of the issues. In recent months there have been press accounts drawing attention to the transfer next year of the celebration of St Patrick's Day to Saturday March 15th. The fact that the press does pay equal attention to the transfer of the Feast of St Joseph to Friday March 14th serves to underline that the media attention is not really drawn to the principles governing these decisions but, rather flippantly, they conjure up images of the Irish notoriety for excessive celebrations of St Patrick's Day. They scarcely notice that many Sisters of St Joseph may rejoice that, at least this year, the Feast of St Joseph is before St Patrick's Day!

All this reminds me of a pattern that goes back to May 1969, at the press conference to launch the Vatican II Reformed *General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar* held at the Press Centre at the Vatican.[1] The occasion was notable for being the first release of a completed documentary reform of an aspect of the Roman Rite. As a young graduate student doing liturgical studies at the time it was a special event to remember. After introductory speeches by three prelates from the Congregation for Divine Worship, when it came to question time, a young lady journalist, claiming to represent the *Rome Daily American* newspaper, jumped up to ask **"How many Saints have been cut off the list?"**.

This led to a flurry of transmissions by news agencies which generated stories about the new Calendar which were somewhat reminiscent of the journalist's own headline in the Rome paper proclaiming *When the Saints Go Marching Out*. Around the world, bishops and clergy as well as parishioners were shocked to read in their morning paper over breakfast how the traditions of their upbringing were being betrayed by the new practices. In fact, we are still suffering under the inadequacies of the formation needed arising from the new *General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar*. There is still angst about the role and status of Saints such as St Christopher and St Philomena.

These stories are typical of the problems in Church issues of getting a reasonable treatment in the daily press or the electronic media. The same can also be true of having positive stories in Church publications when dealing with profound human interest stories. It all seems like *magni passus sed extra viam*, which by a rough Australian translation would read *great strides but off the track*.

The uniqueness of Easter in 2008

March 23rd in 2008 sees Easter Sunday being celebrated as early as any year in history for two centuries. It also means that Ash Wednesday will be celebrated on February 6th which will put extreme pressure on parish groups, schools, and parish liturgy teams, to be ready and organised so early in the year.

The pressures of the early dates may give rise to many questions about the issues and principles for computing the calculation of the date of Easter. These issues were anticipated some months ago in *The West Australian* where the *Burning Questions c*olumn proffered the question "Orthodox and other Christian sects often celebrate Easter Sunday on different days. How are the dates determined?"[2] The trigger here was why Orthodox Christians often celebrate Easter on a different date than in the Western Catholic tradition.

A personal perusal of the thirty Latin *Roman Missals* in my archival collection, with their tables of moveable feasts across two centuries, showed no earlier date for Easter than March 23rd, because Easter falls on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the northern hemisphere Spring Equinox, which is fixed by custom rather than with total uniform accuracy, at March 21st.

Complexity of principles

The liturgical scholar from the Philippines, Anscar Chupungco osb, has made the most comprehensive studies of the cosmic elements of the cycles of nature; cycles of the sun; spring equinoxes; and the cycles of the moon. As well, he covers the various attempts throughout history to prepare a calendar that more accurately synchronises the multitude of factors that bear on the calculation of the cycles of the moon and assigning the Sunday that is Easter to a particular date. In the context of the early Easter in 2008 on March 23rd as nearly the earliest date, Chupungco points out that the last time Easter was celebrated on March 22nd was in 1761 and later in 1818.[3] There were no occasions of Easter Sunday on March 22nd in the twentieth century and there will be none in the twenty-first century.[4]

If the variability of the earliest Easter Sunday is so complex for the difference of two days, March 22nd and March 23rd, it is even more complex for the latest date for Easter. The presumption that it would vary by the length of a single lunar month of twenty eight days is blown apart by the inclusion of a second factor in integrating the solar cycles of 365 days plus approximately six hours. This last component led to the introduction of leap years every four years, yet they are not granted in centennial years not evenly divisible by four.[5] Thus 2000 was a leap year but 1900 was not. These oddities give rise to the need to contrast the Julian Calendar and the Gregorian Calendar.

The Julian Calendar

The Roman republican calendar, based on the cycles of the moon, was well out of synchronicity with the solar calendar. By 50 BC the vernal equinox we recognise now for March 21st was some eight weeks later and increasing. Julius Caesar was then the Roman ruler with the title Augustus. Caesar commissioned an astronomer from Alexandria in Egypt, Sosigines, whose plan was to abandon a calendar based on the lunar calendars to integrate changes in the solar calendar. The number of days in the year was not exactly precise and the gap grew by one month every 30 years or three months every century. The solution was implemented in 46BC (of modern numbering) by the intercalation of adding 2-3 days after February 23 and two additional months of 67 days between the end of November and the beginning of December. With a year of 445 days, 45BC saw the Roman New Year of March 1 now becoming January 1st of the Julian Calendar. The months became twelve and Caesar had created a year with a January 1st starting date.[6]

Even with the changes the calculations still did not work out perfectly and in 8BC and 8AD further alterations were made to the use of intercalary days. Back in 44BC, the second year of the Julian Calendar, the Roman Senate proposed the fifth month (Quintilis) be changed to Julius (July) and the sixth month (Sextilis) be named Augustus (August), so both emperors Julius Caesar and Caesar Augustus are commemorated in the months' names yet the total system was called the Julian Calendar. Because the year was originally perceived to begin in March, the insertion of these new titles, in months honouring the Emperors, did not ruin the clues, present still in the Latin names of the numerical sequence of September (Seventh month), October (Eighth), November (Ninth), December (Tenth), when the original sequence presumed the Roman new year began on March 1st.[7]

The Gregorian Calendar

The passage of time and the growth in astronomical knowledge and better instruments for measuring all coalesced together to indicate serious weaknesses in the intercalary insertions into the Julian Calendar. The calculation of the Julian Calendar year of 365.25 days was too long. At any precise point in two years the time for the sun to be perceived passing overhead was 365.242199 days. The error resulting, 11 minutes and 14 seconds, amounted to a day and a half in two centuries and seven days in a thousand years. As the centuries went by the calendar in use became out of phase with the seasons.

By the time of the beginning of the Council of Trent in 1545, the vernal equinox, so vital in calculating the date of Easter Sunday, was ten days beyond its proper date. The Council of Trent authorised Pope Paul III to initiate action to correct the distortion. The technical difficulties of accuracy as to the proper date meant it was another decade after Trent's last session in 1563 that the new Pope, Gregory XIII, found several theories and various proposals awaiting his consideration and decision.

Gregory XIII's Papal Bill of February 1582 followed the calculations of the Jesuit astronomer, Christopher Clavius, and made them the key to a solution. In order to bring the spring (vernal) equinox of the Northern Hemisphere back to March 21st, Gregory's proposal was to cut ten days out of October. Thus the day after the Feast of St Francis of Assisi (October 4th) was to become October 15th. The exact tropical year was to be calculated as 365.2422 days. This new scale resulted in a difference from the Julian Calendar of 3.12 days every four centuries. This led to the norm that three out of every four centennial years would be common years, that is, not a leap year, and only the centennial years exactly divisible by 400 would be leap years, as in 2000.

Even though a decision was made in Rome in 1582, it was not universally followed for several centuries. The Catholic countries of Europe gradually accepted it in the sixteenth century. The Protestant countries of Northern Europe did not accept the Gregorian Calendar and accepted it only in the nineteenth century. So too did major Asian countries. Britain and the colonies did not make the 10 day adjustment until 1752, as France did in 1806. The Soviet Union accepted it in 1918. Greece finally followed the West in 1923.[8]

Easter and Passover

It would be a change of emphasis to list these two entities in the reverse order, whereby the chronological sequence might determine priority of time and relationship. To list them as 'Easter' and 'Passover' is to give them a relationship in which each phrase or word goes beyond the chronological sense of its date or time to the theological sense of its commemoration and the reason for its celebration. Easter celebrates the resurrection of Christ, as well as his death on the cross, because it is all part of the triduum which renews the death of Christ that was allied with the time of his death, the Jewish Passover.

Chupungco's commentary on the meaning of Easter is a challenge to all Christians of any culture or tradition:

> *Another consideration on the theology of Easter is its date. Unlike Christmas which has a fixed calendar date, Easter can fall on any Sunday within a period of thirty-five days after the full moon following the spring equinox. This happens because the Easter date is the confluence of several cosmic or time elements such as spring, equinox, full moon, and Sunday. Such confluence is needed because Easter is an anniversary and should, in consequence, be celebrated as close as possible to the historical date of Christ's own passover. The question modern people raise is how to translate this cosmic "date" into a calendar date. The answer is that these time elements, which are part of the lunisolar calendar the church uses for this feast, determine the date of Christ's death. Once a year during the week following the spring full moon the church recalls that it was at this time of the year when the Son of God died and rose again. There is something sacred about this "date" because it is related to the church's duty to remember the saving work of Christ.*[9]

Since Easter grew to become the most important celebration in the life of the Christian communities, the very date of its celebration had an impact on many other celebrations and moveable feasts. The dual connection with both lunar and solar cycles meant that the determination of the (Northern spring) vernal equinox was the hinge enabling the swing in both directions of lunar and solar cycles.

Alignment with Jewish Passover

For centuries the Jewish feast of Passover had been celebrated to commemorate the exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt, the passage through the Red Sea, and the eventual entry into the Promised Land. The Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) emphasises the connection with these events by the choice of the evening on the fourteenth day of the Jewish month of Nisan, the first month in the Jewish religious year.

The differences in the Christian communities emerged when those of the eastern Mediterranean areas stuck to the celebration of Easter (and so were called Quartodecimans (Fourteeners) for following the 14th of Nisan. Elsewhere throughout early Christian circles the connection was centralised on observing the first Sunday that followed the first full moon after the March 21st the vernal equinox.

The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) seem to give a different reading to John's account of the crucifixion as being just before the Preparation for Passover in Jerusalem. That was the position of the Quartodecimans in the Eastern Churches but there was another position of those who saw the Passover as being celebrated the next day after the Passover and were thus called the Quintodecimans (Fifteeners). When a day was perceived to begin at sunset, both schools of thought could be sustained.

The differences of the earliest centuries were eventually decided by the first Council of the universal Church in 325, held in Nicaea, called by the Emperor Constantine, who was also responsible for making the Sunday the day of rest in the Roman Empire from 318AD. Nicaea gave us more than the Creed. It also affirmed Easter was to be celebrated on the first Sunday after the Spring full moon after March 21st, and if the full moon fell on a Sunday, Easter would be the seven days later.[10]

Dominical Letters

Anyone who has studied the *Roman Missal's* extensive tables, for calculating the dates on which certain moveable feasts throughout the liturgical year are celebrated, would have noticed the cryptic symbols that control these tables. The arcane language has unique symbols and names. These include "Dominical Letter" which refers to a clever adaptation to calculate the specific date for any day in the year and determining the date of the full moons in any year. Adapting the old Roman system for determining market days, now the system focused on what days were Sundays.[11] This gave rise to the code name 'dominical' or Sunday letter. The system built on the progression of the days of the week by assigning the letters A through G. For example, when January 1st is A, January 2nd is B so that January 8th would start again the sequence from A and January 9th is B. In a leap year, February 29th is not given a Dominical Letter in sequence but, since it is still counted as a weekday, on March 1st of that year previously the Dominical Letter moves to the next letter. Thus on the Tables of Moveable Feasts, in the leap year every four years, next year 2008 is given two dominical letters 'f' and 'e'.[12]

As this research was being prepared the world was focused on the 'red moon' phenomenon to be caused by a lunar eclipse on August 28th, it was expected to be very clearly obvious at moonrise in Western Australia on August 28th, 2007. Such phenomena enthralled the ancient astronomers as far back as Meton, an Athenian astronomer of the fifth century BC.

The cycles of the moon, named the Metonic Cycle to honour him, cover a nineteen year period, at the end of which the new moon appears on the same days as at the beginning of the cycle.[13] This cycle of 235 lunar months in the 19 year period meant that the new and full moons return on the same date of the year. While this was the basis of the ancient Greek calendar, its usage continued into the printing age and modern times, to support the calculations of such a moveable feast as Easter.[14] Meton's accuracy is verified by contemporary computations that 235 lunations and 19 solar years differ by only two hours, yet they mount up over centuries.

Golden Numbers

The Metonic Cycle of 19 years became the medium whereby the vagaries of the lunar cycles are fixed to set dates in the solar year. The principle of the Metonic Cycle means a certain phase of the moon can be calculated to recur on a specific date within the 19 year cycle. A number from 1–19 was assigned to the year in which the full moon of the northern spring equinox came on the Sunday after the equinox and the other years followed in sequence.

In 530AD began the system of the golden numbers, calculated back to the time of the Council of Nicaea of 325, which had sought to overcome the disputes about celebrating the full moon of Passover or the first day of the week (Sunday) so as to make Easter the celebration of the Lord's Resurrection. This working back to 325 did not totally coincide with the conceptual 1AD; but the year before. This introduced an adjustment in the golden numbers by taking one off the figure obtained by dividing the year of the Gregorian Calendar by 19 and subtracting one from that figure to define the golden number of the year. Thus 2008 finishes up with the golden number of 14.

Reform of Easter: A fixed date?

Throughout history occasional adjustments were made to the calculations. The not exactly perfect synchronisation of the lunar and solar cycles led to the Spring equinox moving later than the preferred March 21st. Both in ancient times, in the early Christian era, and in modern times, there have been numerous attempts to revise the calendar arrangements as regards perfecting the calculation of the date of Easter. A contemporary German historian (Adolph Adam) draws attention to some of the many complex issues that emerge in our new century, even with our atomic clocks and nano seconds.

> *In modern times there has been a growing desire for a fixed date of Easter. The wish is based, first of all, on the fact that the feast of the resurrection of Jesus celebrates a historical event and that, given our solar calendar, the feast would more appropriately be celebrated on the same date in the solar year. A further consideration is that because of the great variation in the date of Easter the dates of many other feasts vary widely, with some of them falling on a weekday (Easter Monday and Pentecost Monday, Ascension, Corpus Christi). This variation in dates also entails many disadvantages in the secular sphere. The growing assimilation of people and continents and their modern economies calls for a fixed and easily grasped chronological order with a uniform rhythm of workdays and holidays, times of work and times of leisure…*[15]

At the time of the Second Vatican Council the Fathers of the Council saw an ecumenical opportunity to focus attention on the mixed bag of issues surrounding the date of Easter. Rather than incorporate a statement in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* they published an appendix as a particular Conciliar document, a Declaration, carrying the force and authority of the Council itself:

APPENDIX
A DECLARATION OF THE SECOND ECUMENICAL COUNCIL OF THE VATICAN ON REVISION OF THE CALENDAR

§131. The Second Ecumenical Sacred Council of the Vatican, recognizing the importance of the wishes expressed by many concerning the assignment of the feast of Easter to a fixed Sunday and concerning an unchanging calendar, having carefully considered the effects which could result from the introduction of a new calendar, declares as follows:
1. The Sacred Council would not object if the feast of Easter was assigned to a particular Sunday of the Gregorian Calendar, provided that those whom it may concern, especially the brethren who are not in communion with the Apostolic See, give their assent.
2. The Sacred Council likewise declares that it does not oppose efforts designed to introduce a perpetual calendar into civil society.
But amongst the various systems which have been suggested to stabilise a perpetual calendar and to introduce it into civil life, the Church has no objection only in the case of those systems which retain and safeguard a seven-day week with Sunday, without the introduction of any days outside the week, so that the succession of weeks may be left intact, unless there is question of the most serious reasons. Concerning these the Apostolic See shall judge.

Almost as a form of response the World Council of Churches made an observation:

…the churches should arrive at a solution [for the date of Easter] for reasons based entirely on the religious meaning of the feast and for the purpose of Christian unity rather that the for the purpose of satisfying inherently secular interests.[16]

Speaking as an astronomer with both a scientific and religious perspective of the issues, Dr Johnston concludes her paper on Easter with a further ecumenical insight some four decades after Vatican II itself.

At a conference held at Aleppo in 1997 the World Council of Churches recommended that a common date for Easter should be achieved by maintaining the link between the date of Easter, the full moon, and the equinox, but that the most accurate means should be used to compute the astronomical date. They recommended that the meridian of Jerusalem could be used as a basis for these calculations. In this way, the Nicaea principle would be preserved and neither Churches in the East or West would have to change their policy. They recommended that this system should be adopted in 2001, since this year both dates of Easter coincide. Currently, no Church has adopted this proposal.[17]

This sad commentary on the lack of any momentum or political will to achieve the revision of the calendar is an indictment of our contemporary world. With all the technologies of communication and astronomical tables, the world seems incapable of working together better than any of the previous attempts in history. While Easter is the root metaphor of the Paschal Mystery, it seems to be an issue of mystery rather than paschal joy.

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