

The 1923 Pan-Orthodox Congress of Constantinople

The Pan-Orthodox Congress of 1923 was convened by the Ecumenical Patriarch Meletius and is considered to be the first concrete step towards the convening of a Council that could bring together the Orthodox Autocephalous Churches. The Patriarch asked the Primate of the Orthodox Churches in a letter of **8 February 1923** to send specialists who could form a commission to study the problem of the **calendar**, as well as other problems facing the Church and find canonical solutions to them. The letter (V. Ioniță, p. 5) is extraordinary because, starting from the problem of the calendar, it manages to take into consideration issues such as the importance of the unity of mankind, as well as of all Christians, the full integration of Orthodox Christians into the societies where they live, especially in Diaspora, where the new calendar had already been fully introduced. Meletius IV acts as a true Primate, asking for the help of the whole Church in the spirit of synodality. He proposes that the specialist delegates of the autocephalous Churches consider whether or not there is a need for a Pan-Orthodox Council.

Unfortunately, only a few Orthodox Churches participated in this event: obviously the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Serbian Church, the Romanian Church, the Church of Cyprus and the Church of Greece. The Russian Church was attended by Archbishop Alexander of America (who at that time had already been suspended from office by the Russian Church). Therefore it cannot be considered that the Russian Church participated fully in the Congress. The other autocephalous Churches refused the invitation. At that time the good ecumenical relations, as well as the optimistic perspectives for the Orthodox-Anglican and the Orthodox-Veteran Catholic dialogue made it possible for an Anglican bishop, Charles Gore, to be present at this Congress, as well as a Vetero-Catholic theologian, Adolf Küry, who will become bishop of the Vetero-Catholic Church in Switzerland.

The Congress, worked in three commissions: dogmatic, practical and scientific. These commissions took decisions on seven topics:

1. The updating of the calendar;
2. The Orthodox Church and the adoption of the updated calendar;
3. The importance of the sacrament of marriage and the sacrament of ordination;
4. The question of second marriages for widowed priests and deacons;
5. The age for ordination;
6. The celebration of 1600 years since the first Ecumenical Council;
7. The situation of the Russian Church.

This meeting was the occasion for the Churches to make a list of the main issues of concern to the whole Orthodox Church.

Among these issues, the calendar was certainly of extraordinary importance. The Romanian Church asked to be able to introduce the updating of the calendar over a longer period of time, in order to prepare the faithful, and the proposal was accepted by Congress. This proposal came from an environment in which some believers feared that it was a question of introducing a new calendar, which was absolutely not the case. It had to be explained to the people that this was an updating of the Julian calendar for practically social reasons, to facilitate the daily life of the Orthodox faithful, especially in the diaspora. This was the time when, after the experience of the First World War, the aspects of peace, unity and good international relations would have influenced the desire to align the feasts.⁸⁹ As Father Meletius himself points out, the desire for Christian unity also had an important influence on the desire to celebrate together with all Christians and thereby facilitate personal relations between all Christians. However, not all churches received and updated the calendar and this led to an even more complicated situation for the Orthodox Church than before.

- 10 days: 4 octombrie 1582 - 28 februarie 1700;
- 11 days 1 martie 1700 - 28 februarie 1800;
- 12 days 1 martie 1800 - 28 februarie 1900;
- 13 days 1 martie 1900 - 1 octombrie 1924

The problem of marriage and ordination is one of the issues that will reappear during the pan-Orthodox meetings of the twentieth century. The issue that interests us most, the idea of the Holy 'Pan-Orthodox' Council, appeared at this 1923 Congress in the context of the 1600th anniversary of the first Ecumenical Council of Nice. The Romanian Church proposes, according to Ioniță, to organise a Pan-Orthodox event with the ecumenical participation of all those who confess the Nicene symbol of faith, in order to avoid the celebration of a local and isolated anniversary. The 1923 Congress of Constantinople accepted the proposal of the Romanian Church, advancing the idea of a possible future Pan-Orthodox Council. This is how

Viorel Ioniță describes this historical event:

The decision of the 1923 Congress on the 6th theme is based on a Romanian suggestion made by Metropolitan Nicolae Bălan from Sibiu and presented to the congress by Archimandrite Iuliu Scriban. The suggestion referred to the celebration of 1600 years since the First Ecumenical Council in 325. The congress greeted the proposal and advised the Ecumenical Patriarchate to take steps and organize a Pan-Orthodox Synod, so that the event would be celebrated in a dignified manner by the whole Church and not only at a local level. Moreover, the congress recommended that all Churches who confess the Nicene Creed be invited to this Synod, not only the Orthodox Churches. By doing this, the Congress did not limit itself to the celebration of the First Ecumenical Council, but it suggested that a Pan-Orthodox Synod be summoned. In this way it set in motion, for the first time at a Pan-Orthodox level, the idea of assembling a Synod, called *Pan-Orthodox* (V. Ionita, p. 9).

Unfortunately, the Council, at that time still called 'Pan-Orthodox', planned by the Congress of 1923 for 1925 or 1932 on the occasion of the 1600th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, did not take place because of various closures by the Turkish government, the opposition of the conservative part of the Greek Church and the isolation of the Russian Church under the Communist regime⁹³.

Despite the fact that the 1923 Congress in Constantinople did not succeed in resolving all the issues it considered, especially in successfully convening a Pan-Orthodox Council, the

Congress nevertheless bore some extraordinary fruits at the social, ecumenical and ecclesial level.

On a social level, in the inter-war period, the members of the Congress tried to update the calendar and analyse the possibility of a Pan-Orthodox Council and of certain dispensations concerning marriage and priesthood. In an ecumenical context, the pan-Orthodox but also ecumenical celebration of the Council of Nicaea in 325 sought to revive inter-Christian relations. Of course, the updating of the calendar also has an ecumenical significance. Finally, at the ecclesial level, the 1923 Congress in Constantinople acknowledged the canonical need for a Great Council; it was proposed to call it 'Pan-Orthodox'.

These issues appeared at a post-war time, when everyone's spiritual attention was directed towards what was necessary. Details were sacrificed in the name of some essential Christian and human values, which were truly ignored by the terrible violence displayed by humanity during the First World War. The essential values that were now on everyone's mind, even spiritually, were those concerning the unity of the human race and the dignity of the person, which of course also implied freedom, not only political, but above all personal freedom. In fact, the themes that came to the fore in 1923 were consequences of certain events that had actually happened.

Further information (The **Julian calendar**, proposed by **Julius Caesar** in **AUC 708 (46 BC)**, was a reform of the **Roman calendar**.^[1] It took effect on 1 January **AUC 709 (45 BC)**, by **edict**. It was designed with the aid of **Greek mathematicians** and **astronomers** such as **Sosigenes of Alexandria**.

The calendar became the predominant calendar in the **Roman Empire** and subsequently most of the **Western world** for more than 1,600 years until 1582, when **Pope Gregory XIII** promulgated **a minor modification** to reduce the average length of the year from 365.25 days to 365.2425 days and thus corrected the Julian calendar's drift against the **solar year**. **Worldwide adoption** of this revised calendar, which became known as the **Gregorian calendar**, took place over the subsequent centuries, first in **Catholic** countries and subsequently in **Protestant** countries of the **Western Christian world**.

The Julian calendar is still used in parts of the **Eastern Orthodox Church** and in parts of **Oriental Orthodoxy** as well as by the **Berbers**.^[2]

The Julian calendar has two types of years: a normal year of 365 days and a leap year of 366 days. They follow a simple cycle of three normal years and one leap year, giving an average year that is 365.25 days long. That is more than the actual **solar year** value of 365.24219 days (the current value, which varies) which means the Julian calendar gains a day every 128 years. For any given event during the years from 1901 to 2099 inclusive, its date according to the Julian calendar is 13 days behind its corresponding Gregorian date).