

PATRIARCH TIKHON AND THE CALENDAR PROBLEM
(According to the Letter of Tikhon, Patriarch
of Moscow and All Russia, to the Ecumenical
Patriarch Germanos II)

by
ANDREAS N. PAPA VASSILIOU
Doctor of Theology – Headmaster

One of the more serious problems which Tikhon faced, though he hadn't yet completed his first year as the first Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia after the restoration of the Patriarchal institution in Russia, was the calendar reformation. This serious problem, which of course was not a new one for the Church, was provoked abruptly, because of the decision of the Soviet Government which arose from the October Socialistic Revolution, to demand in January 29, 1918, without asking the advice of, or coming to an understanding with, the Church, the use of the new Gregorian calendar in the Russian Republic in every-day relations.

This decision was taken just nine days after the publication, on January 20, 1918, of the Order-Law for the separation of the Church from the State and the School from the Church. In July of the same year the 5th Assembly of the Soviets, whose work was the construction of the revolutionary Constitution arising from the October Revolution, came back to the same theme of the separation of the Church from the State and became more explicit.

According to the new Law, after the separation of the Church from the State, the Church was obliged to accept the Gregorian calendar in its liturgical life. In the places where the Orthodox comprise the majority of the population, the Law included among the working and solemn days some great Christian feasts, for example, Christmas, Epiphany, Easter and Pentecost in accordance with the old-Julian calendar.

Despite this provision of the Law, the introduction of the Gregorian calendar in the Russian Republic increased the tension in the

relations between the Church and the new Government, for the reason that the Church not only disagreed with this hasty action of the Government, but also decided that the old-Julian calendar should continue in force.

The Pan-Russian Synod, whose work continued from August 15, 1917, under the presidency of Patriarch Tikhon, in a meeting on the day following the publication of the governmental Order, January 30, 1918, took the decision to preserve the old-Julian calendar and to entrust the examination of the calendar problem to a Specific Committee composed of known Russian Theologians and other specialists.

At the same time this Synod, before its dissolution in September 1918, advised Patriarch Tikhon to communicate with the Ecumenical Patriarch, Germanos V (1913 - 1918), in order to ask for his position «as the Superior of Christ's Mother Great Church of Constantinople and as the *Corypheus* in the accordant chorus of the all Orthodox local Autocephalous Churches» in relation to the possibility of introducing in the practices of the Orthodox Church the so called new-Gregorian calendar. The reason for which the official position of the Church of Constantinople was requested was because the calendar question in the Russian Orthodox Church, daughter Church of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, though not doctrinal, reached proportions of possible controversy with the other autocephalous Orthodox Churches.

So, the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, Tikhon, «acting upon the commands of the local Synod which had just been dissolved», forwarded to the Ecumenical Patriarch, Germanos V, a Letter, with No. 464 and date January 21, 1919. Patriarch Tikhon's Letter was transmitted from Constantinople to the Editor of the magazine «EKKLESIA», who published it, in translation from Russian in Greek, in the first pages (233-236) of the edition of July 25, 1925 (Year C, No. 30).

In this Letter, Patriarch Tikhon, in an excellent way, expresses the reasons for which it is not possible in an Orthodox State to use two calendars without running the risk of enstranging the people from the Church, even in the case of a continuing and essential alteration of the condition of political life.

Though he recognized the great importance which an immediate solution of the calendar problem has for the Russian Church, Patriarch Tikhon does not proceed to its partial arrangement, since this is a most important matter with great «pan-ecclesiastical» meaning.

On the other hand, the fact remains that for many years this subject was occupying the other Orthodox Autocephalous Churches as well.

As a consequence, Patriarch Tikhon rightly wished a collective confrontation of the calendar problem within the general frame of intercourse and cooperation among the Eastern Churches of the same doctrine. So justified, he did not proceed to a solution of this question «for itself without asking beforehand the opinion and the advice of the saintly brothers in Christ, leaders of the Divine Orthodox Autocephalous Churches, with the Great Mother Church of Christ at the head».

Worthy of particular attention is the fact that Patriarch Tikhon did not directly communicate with the Leaders of the other Orthodox Autocephalous Churches. In view of «standing before» all the other Churches Patriarch Tikhon asked through the Ecumenical Patriarch Germanos V (1913-1918), in respect to the Church of Constantinople whose beloved daughter the Russian Church had been for many centuries, about the possibility of changing the old calendar. The Patriarch in his Letter declared that, until the reception of the answers of the other Churches, the Russian Church would continue to preserve the old calendar according to the opinion of the Specific Committee established.

The reserve which Patriarch Tikhon and the Holy Synod of the Russian Church displayed towards the decision of the Soviet Republic to introduce the new Gregorian calendar, and the spirit of postponement in their thoughts during the brief study of the Report of the Specific Committee in reference to the calendar are due to deeper reasons. The contention that they did not have sufficient time and that many other «important and urgent» matters were expected to be solved by them while evident is not absolutely persuasive.

According to our point of view, there were deeper reasons which may be summarized with the following observations:

a. Though the appearance of the calendar problem for the Orthodox Churches was not a «thunder bolt out of the blue sky» a fact confirmed by Patriarch Tikhon in his relevant Letter to the Ecumenical Patriarch, Germanos V, nevertheless the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church appeared unprepared to confront the calendar reformation imposed by the State and unwilling to accept the completed change at that time, because of fear of criticism for «innovation».

b. The leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church was and is by

tradition conservative. As a result of this conservativeness, which according to Patriarch Tikhon respects and is attached to the «ecclesiastical order» established through the centuries, there was no desire to be troubled for the sake of a reformation which was incomplete and perhaps of short duration. The thoughtless adoption of the calendar reformation included the danger of being criticized as a denier of this tradition, in a period in which unity was necessary and misunderstood abroad, and could deprive her of indispensable moral encouragement and material assistance.

c. Both as it appears and in the Letter of Patriarch Tikhon, the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church was not persuaded by the existence of the theoretical bases which defended the preference of the one over the other calendar. The Gregorian calendar may astronomically appear more accurate than the Julian, but even it is not absolutely precise. This fact inevitably leads to the search for another more accurate calendar. «Therefore it is more proper», Patriarch Tikhon remarks, «To wait until this question about this new and perfectional rearrangement is clarified...».

d. At that time, the position of the Orthodox Autocephalous Churches, formed after the interchange of opinions among the Leaders of the Churches during the period of the reign of Ecumenical Patriarch Joachim III (first patriarchal period 1878-1884, second patriarchal period 1901-1912), was the preservation of the old-Julian calendar. Therefore, during the period in which the calendar problem was surfaced in the Soviet Republic, the Russian Church was obliged to keep this obligation. Alteration of this decision may have been done after reaching an understanding and agreement in opinion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the rest of the local Orthodox Autocephalous Churches.

This position was formulated in 1903 in a written response by the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece to the same Ecumenical Patriarch, Joachim III. The solution of the calendar question was postponed in Greece until 1919, when the Holy Synod moved again, expressing its opinion that the Greek State, for the time being, may accept the new Gregorian calendar, until a new and more scientifically precise one could be constructed.

e. Patriarch Tikhon, as an ecclesiastical leader with clear-sighted abilities, perceived the interlacing of the calendar problem with the general ecclesiastical crisis. This was let loose in the whirlwind of the tragic events of those years. He expected that a number of Clergy,

particularly among the lower classes, would accept the calendar change and use this against him.

For this reason, and in view of the new Law of the Soviet Republic of January 29, 1918, Patriarch Tikhon wanted to give a solution to the problem so he and the Russian Church would avoid undesired situations. The only «partial and secondary subject» remaining to be solved was whether or not the Church must celebrate the civil new year on the day of Lord's Circumision or transfer its celebration the feast of the martyr Saint Bonifatius (December 19, according to the old calendar).

The following ecclesiastical events in the Russian Orthodox Church verified a dim perception of Patriarch Tikhon, which was manifested through various indications. The Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate decided to accept the new-Gregorian calendar, with the beginning date of March 10, 1924, which was calculated as March 23, 1924. Under the presidency of the Metropolitan Evdokimos, the schismatic Synod hastened to take advantage of this decision with a statement in the Russian press, «to inform the Christians who acknowledge it, that the feast of Easter will be celebrated on the 27/th of April according to the reformed calendar (on the 14th of April, according to the old one), as it is movable. There is not one disagreement among the various ecclesiastical parties in Russia on the question». This publication in the «Chronicles» of the magazine «EK-KLISIA» (Vol. A, 1924, page 432) confirms the reasonableness of our opinions stated above.

We do not know what the position of the official leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church was in reference to this decision of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the relevant statement of the schismatic Synod under Metropolitan Evdokimos. As far as we know, at this period Patriarch Tikhon was seriously shaken in his health, although he had been released from prison.

We are certain that Patriarch Tikhon wanted a quick solution for dissuading actions from the onset of the calendar problem, such as that of the schismatic Synod under Metropolitan Evdokimos. This quick solution was mainly to end the affliction of Orthodox who were staying in places where they were a minority and where the civil Law didn't take into consideration the Orthodox ecclesiastical order.

Patriarch Tikhon to this aspect of the calendar problem very correctly gives great importance. According to notes made in his Letter, they were in a difficult position because of the parallel daily use

of the two calendars; the one for daily life and vital relations, and the other for the liturgical practices of the Church. For example, Patriarch Tikhon refers to the case of the Orthodox in Finland, where the majority were Lutherans, who had accepted the new calendar. A custom for celebrating the Divine Liturgy in the Orthodox Churches was established during the days of celebrating Christmas, Annunciation and other Christian feasts by the Lutherans to blunt the sharp difficulties the Orthodox had reached.

The reason for which this measure was decided was to occupy the Orthodox population during this involuntary holiday with something which would produce a spiritual profit, but also to be protected from the «bait» of visiting a Lutheran mass. After the political alteration in 1917 when Finland was proclaimed an independent state (in July of 1919 it became a Republic), the Pan-Russian Synod, as Patriarch Tikhon states in his Letter, was obliged to allow to the Finish Orthodox parishes to celebrate according to the new calendar. Christians in other places could be found in the same or similar position, where new separate states were formed, for example Poland, Lithuania, Esthonia and generally where the Orthodox constituted a minority.

Patriarch Tikhon's general concern over the calendar problem consequently was restricted to localities in central Russia and in the other purely Orthodox areas, where the calendar reformation was put into effect, after the decision of the Authorities in Russia. He was anxious about the possibility that the Law which was in effect since 1918, would be a change for the worse so that the political life intentionally would come in direct opposition with the ecclesiastical order «precisely because of the struggle against the faith of the majority of the inhabitants and in order to restrict the influence of the Orthodox Church on the people».

He felt the need to deal with this problem as soon as possible and to solve it according to the demands of the times because of his perception of the new arrangements and possibility of a political/religious evolution. By the same spirit and the relevant disposition, the Pan-Russian Synod which decided to re-examine the possibility of the introduction of the new-Gregorian calendar into the practical life of the Church was put into motion.

The following events did not allow the official leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church to occupy itself again with the calendar problem and take the indispensable decision: The locking up of the churches and confiscation of Church property (Decree of January 23,

1918); the desecration of the Christian graves and the destruction of the relics of the saints (Encyclical Order of March 1, 1919); the famine of 1921; localization of Patriarch Tikhon (May 10, 1922), and the appearance of the «Living Church» and the schismatic movement (beginning of 1923).

An answer was not received to the Letter of Patriarch Tikhon addressed to the Ecumenical Patriarch Germanos V during the above mentioned period. In fact, as a result of the four year old civil war, examination of the problems was not possible and thus the two calendars were kept in joint operation.

Because of this situation Patriarch Tikhon felt deep sorrow and desired the early release from the difficulties and destructive consequences caused by the prolonging of the calendar problem. Without repudiating the spirit of conservatism and without betraying the obligation to the patristic tradition, he showed disposition for adaptation for the benefit of the Church. In this situation his formulation became apophthegmatic and for this reason it is worthy of particular attention and great praise. Patriarch Tikhon said, «In any case I would have considered the relative value of the Julian or the Gregorian calendar. And in as much as it is desirable to keep the Julian calendar delivered by the Fathers, the destructive changes now completed in the life of countries and nations oblige the ecclesiastical authority to think about the possibility of introducing the new calendar in ecclesiastical practice».

Patriarch Tikhon asked Patriarch Germanos V, as the «Highest of the chorus of all the Autocephalous Churches, after consulting with the «Superiors» of the other Orthodox Churches to give their opinion and fraternal advice about how each local Orthodox Church should act in the present situation». As this matter was so serious, it was necessary to hear the view of the other Churches regarding its essence and its various effects on the daily liturgical practice of the Church».

To address this serious problem, Patriarch Tikhon asked the equally serious disjunctive question: Is it possible to diverge from the calendar of the Church, which was accepted «from long ago»? (i) If yes, what are these divergences? (ii) If no, then not one differentiation is permitted to the Julian calendar which is still «in power». This double question was submitted in connection with another indisputable remark that every local Orthodox Church may form its policy in relation to the calendar «under the pressure of the sometimes unexpectedly arranged vital conditions». In other words, Patriarch Tikhon accepted the possibility of diverging from a unique line in subjects where the faith was

not affected and the particular conditions were imposing adaptation and divergency.

Patriarch Tikhon proceeded to give four possible solutions to the problems to facilitate the Ecumenical Patriarchate in its answer to his Letter to Patriarch Germanos V. By order of answer, coherence of thought, reference to the patristic tradition and the liturgical elaboration of the calendar question, he proved his deep theological training and sincere love for the Church and its people which flowed out of the great consciousness of his Patriarchal capacity.

We compare these solutions proposed by Patriarch Tikhon briefly because of the particular interest they present. With these we also complete our general reference to this remarkable Letter of the first Russian Patriarch since the restoration of the Orthodox Patriarchal Institution in Moscow on October 28, 1917.

1. The Eastern Orthodox Church preserves entirely the Julian calendar and perhaps allows only the transfer of celebrating the date of the new year. This will be considered as necessary, from the feast of the Lord's Circumcision to the feast of the martyr Saint Bonifatius, six days before Christmas. This position is theoretically stable and is in accordance with the tradition of the Orthodox Church. Practically, it is applicable only in the case where the State recognizes and respects the needs and the opinions of the Orthodox population.

2. The second possible solution is opposite to the first. That is to say the Orthodox Church absolutely approves the introduction of the new calendar. The date of its beginning accepts the day of June 3, 1919, which will be estimated as the day of June 16, 1919. In such a case there will be adaptation of the time of the celebration of the Saints whose memories fall in the weeks of the Lord's Passion and the Easter week, as well as some other feasts. The most serious problem that may arise due to the adoption of the new calendar is that the leadership of the Church will be criticized for violation of the relevant canon of the First Ecumenical Council concerning the time of celebrating Easter. This will give an opportunity to zealots, who have little knowledge about the questions of faith and discipline, to provoke confusion and dissention of spirit.

3. The third solution is a tempering of the first two. According to this, the feast of Easter and the movable feasts of the Triodion and Pentecostarion will be celebrated according to the old Julian calendar, and the immovable feasts and the memories of the Saints (Mineon: Books of Monthly Services) will be transferred to the new Gregorian calendar. This allows the Orthodox «Paschalion» to remain uninfluenced. This also removes all difficulties connected with keeping the

immovable feasts for the Orthodox population. The difficulties which have no relation to the movable feasts are not harsh, as Easter and Pentecost are always celebrated on Sunday.

4. The fourth solution is also possible. The first answer is considered more correct, and for this reason more desirable, each local Orthodox Church could choose the second or third solution when it deems necessary without causing a rupture in the ecclesiastical communion. This proposal is strengthened by the example of Saint Polycarpus and Pope Anicetus and by the general rule of the first inter-Church relations as stated by Saint Vicentius, «in all, love».

Reviewing the Letter of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, Tikhon, to the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Germanos V, we say without hesitation that it is a very important text. Besides the particular interest it has for the calendar reformation in the Soviet Republic and the calendar problem in general, this Letter of Patriarch Tikhon contains other varied meanings. It is worthy to list the remarkable texts of the Ecclesiastical Correspondence (Epistolography).

Analytically the elements of the Letter which have permanent and lasting value are:

1. With all that Patriarch Tikhon addresses to the Ecumenical Patriarch, as apostrophe, he shows his respects and regard to the person of the «Superior of the Christ's Great Mother Church of Constantinople and *Corypheus* in accordant chorus of the local Orthodox Churches everywhere». These words are surely not an expression of politeness or use of an established phraseology in ecclesiastical correspondence, but they are a formulation with substantial importance.

2. The dialogue of the Russian Patriarch with the Leaders of the other Orthodox Autocephalous Churches is not carried on «directly», but through the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. This confirms the relationship of the Russian Orthodox Church as daughter of Christ's «Great Mother Church of Constantinople».

3. The calendar and other ecclesiastical problems addressed by Patriarch Tikhon are included in the wider framework of the greater Orthodox family. He does not pursue their solution partially, but in a general manner and with a collective spirit, after weighing and tempering all the local conditions with the general circumstances.

4. His statement has points characteristically Orthodox when he invokes the consciousness of responsibility and owing contribution for a united approach and collective solution of the calendar problem. These are absolutely in agreement with the Dogmatics and the Ecclesiology of the Orthodox Theology. The characteristic points are:

a. «We are all one in Christ».

- b. «We are all members of His mystical Body».
- c. «We are all children of His One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church».
- d. «We have common inheritance, which we ought to preserve together».
- e. «We have common work, which we ought to do with common counsel and united powers».

5. Of great importance is his accentuation of Patristic tradition and the obligation of its respect and preservation. This is indicated by what he writes about the First Ecumenical Council and the liturgical custom in the daily life of the Church.

6. He refers to the politics of his country without any purpose to counterfeit what happened in his time. With sober-minded respect of the historical truth, he exposes his contemporary situation and the probable evolution of events. This position of Patriarch Tikhon in reference to the ecclesiastical and political events of his time certifies his responsibility as Leader of the Church, who approaches everything, criticizes and remarks in accordance with «right understanding» for the benefit of the Church.

7. He distinguishes the essential from the non-essential. He shows sinuosity, disposal and readiness for re-adaptation, aiming to preserve what expresses the essence of the Church and the will of the faithful. But he neither reconciles nor retreats when the foundation of the Church as a divine institution and spiritual community is at risk.

8. He does not disregard the existence of different tensions in the bosom of the Church and rightly estimates the dangers of a possible reaction of the «unknowledgeable» zealot members of the Church. He puts the spirit of unity and unanimity among his basic targets.

9. He is not surprised by what happened around him and does not proceed to spasmodic actions. He is not interested in the temporary. He faces the present moving to the dimension of the future with the criterion of the long past. He is not in a hurry, but acts with circumspection and good sense.

10. His seriousness and responsibility is proved by the fact that at the same time he gives the disjunctive answers to the compared questions given to the Leaders of the Churches, he does not shirk responsibility and does not expect them to solve his problems. He exerted personal efforts for solving the problem without making a claim for his own profit or personal projection.

This is our opinion of Patriarch Tikhon and the calendar problem based on the above-mentioned Letter to the Ecumenical Patriarch Germanos V.