

Pioneering Priests: Establishing the Greek Orthodox Faith in America
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Changing Times

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As we open to the first page of the calendar, it is appropriate to reflect on the calendar itself. Calendars have changed throughout history, differing with each culture and epoch. In ancient Greece, calendars, the time of new year, and the name of the months varied with each city-state. Later, the conquests of Alexander brought another idea of time, with the year beginning around the autumnal equinox. Even the concept of a day differs with each culture. Today we follow the Roman custom of starting the day at midnight. The ancient Greeks, like the Jews and the Muslims, considered sunset the beginning of their day, and their months started with the evening on which the new moon was first seen.

Much of the world today, including the countries where the Orthodox faith is dominant, has adopted the solar calendar that we use as a secular calendar. This is usually referred to as the Western, Christian, or Gregorian calendar, after Pope Gregory XIII (1502-1585), who commissioned calendar revision in 1582. It took almost two centuries before this calendar was accepted by Britain and its empire in 1752, including our eastern seaboard. The Eastern Orthodox world adopted this calendar less than a century ago. For almost 1500 years, the entire Orthodox world adhered to the same calendar, known as the Old or Julian Calendar. This is no longer the case. The Revised Julian or New Calendar is now followed by the Greek Orthodox and most of the other Eastern Orthodox Churches. It is one of the major recent changes in our Church.

At least since 1900, there has been a difference of 13 days between the Julian and Gregorian Calendars. The difference in the dates that Orthodox Christians celebrated Christmas and Easter was often noted with perplexity by the secular press. The Greek Orthodox faithful in Worcester, Massachusetts saw that their Christian neighbors had a holiday on December 25 to celebrate Christmas. Desiring to have a special day on which to celebrate their parish Feast Day, they chose as the name of their parish St. Spyridon, whose Julian calendar feast day coincided with Christmas Day on the Gregorian Calendar.

About the time of World War I, the calendar uniformity of the Orthodox world began to change. Secular governments in Bulgaria in 1916, Russia in 1918, and Serbia in 1919 all adopted the Gregorian calendar. In Greece the transition took place in early 1923 with a 13-day adjustment. Within months Ecumenical

Patriarch Meletios IV (Metaxakis, 1872-1935) convened an Inter-Orthodox Congress in Constantinople. From May 10 to June 8, 1923, they addressed the calendar and other pressing issues. These were especially turbulent times for the Church. The 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and the ongoing peace negotiations in the aftermath of the 1922 Turkish victory over Greece had brought about major changes in the Orthodox world. Discussions at the Congress were long and unanimity elusive. The Church of Constantinople, including its parishes in America, decided to adopt a "Revised Julian Calendar," with midnight, September 30, 1923 selected as the moment of conversion of the religious calendar. Several Orthodox jurisdictions, including the Churches of Jerusalem, Russia, and Serbia, declined to change; they continued to follow the Old Calendar.

This change in the religious calendar impacted Greek Orthodox parishes and priests across the Archdiocese. For Archimandrite Agathangelos Georgakopoulos, who was serving (1920-1924) at the Annunciation parish in Cleveland, calendar reform appears to have hastened his departure. He had served in the U.S. since 1913. He was briefly at the Annunciation parish in Providence, Rhode Island, but spent most of his 14 years in America in the Midwest, including 5 parishes in Ohio. His last would be St. Demetrios in Waterloo, Iowa. Although he was a naturalized American citizen, he would return to Greece in September 1927.

According to the Annunciation parish history, Father Georgakopoulos was an advocate of the Julian Calendar and was forced out by those favoring the New Calendar. If so, he took a different stand at his next parish, Holy Trinity in Canton, Ohio. There in December 1924 he publicly supported calendar reform. In a statement quoted in both local newspapers Father Georgakopoulos said:

Modern methods of transportation increased the intercourse of the various European nations, and the discrepancy in the two calendars confused the commercial relations of these nations. When the soldiers of the different nationalities in [World War I] met on the same battlefield for a common cause, [they] found their allied Christian brethren celebrating Christmas, while some of them waited for their December 25 to come around.... From this a voice of protest went forth which was heeded by the...patriarchs of the Greek Orthodox church, who began their labors to make it possible for all Christian people to celebrate the great holiday of Christmas on the same day.... I am gratified for the change. It eliminates all confusion and mistakes.

This sentiment, however, was not shared by the cross-town Greek Orthodox parish, Saint Haralambos, which had not yet accepted the New Calendar. In January 1925 they still celebrated Christmas according to the Old Calendar.

As you go about your business this year, you may think there is not enough time to get everything done. When you set your clocks ahead on March 9, you may feel the loss of that one hour of sleep. If so, think back with compassion on the people of Greece, who went to sleep on February 16, 1923 and woke up—Rip Van Winkle-like—on March 1.