

Old vs. New Calendar: Frequently Asked Questions

by Anastasios Hudson on March 18th, 2013-used with permission.

Q. I'm Greek Orthodox but I've never heard of the "Old Calendar." Could you please explain what this means?

A. All Orthodox in the world used the Julian Calendar, which is currently thirteen days behind our modern civil calendar, until March 1924. At that time, the bishops of the Church in Greece unilaterally converted their dioceses to the New Calendar, by deleting thirteen days at once, so that the religious calendar would coincide with the civil. This means that Orthodox Christians across the world were now celebrating the important celebrations of our faith out of sync with each other, which impacted the unity of the Orthodox Church. The majority of the Orthodox in the world did not accept this change, as is still the case in places like Russia, Serbia, Jerusalem, and Georgia.

Q. So the majority of the Orthodox in the world did not accept this change. Why did the Greek Church promote it, then?

A. Greece had just suffered the Catastrophe in 1922, and was destabilized internally between factions. Those in power believed that the only way Greece could survive was to ally with the Western powers such as Great Britain. The adoption of the New Calendar was seen as a way to cement ties with the Anglican Church and make the Greek people look more akin to Western Europeans to ensure greater political and cultural integration.

Q. Had the Calendar ever been an issue discussed before?

A. Yes. In the 16th century, when Pope Gregory XIII instituted the New Calendar, he wrote to the Orthodox to encourage them to accept it. They refused, and condemned the Calendar on three separate occasions. One of these Orthodox councils resulted in a document called the Sigillion of 1583, which condemned the New Calendar as incompatible with the Orthodox faith.

Q. Did anyone in Greece resist this change?

A. Yes. About 25% of the people and many of the priests in Greece at that time did not accept this change. Many more priests were unhappy with the change, but they were threatened with loss of livelihood since the Church in Greece is not separate from the State (and, indeed, to this day, many Old Calendarist priests work a secular job and take little or no salary from their parish). Monks from Mt. Athos, the center of worldwide Orthodox monasticism, came to serve them. Some of the bishops who originally went along with the change tried to get it overturned privately, and when in 1935 they saw this was not going to happen, returned to the original Julian Calendar (now called the "Old"). They ordained new bishops, and formed a Synod that maintained the traditional Calendar. The State of Greece persecuted them, calling them "Old Calendarists" (Παλαιοημερολογίτες) which they meant as an insult. The Old Calendarists preferred to call themselves Genuine Orthodox Christians (GOC), because they did not alter even one Tradition of the Orthodox Church. These bishops travelled to other Orthodox countries to solicit support, but due to the volatile nature of the world at that time, none came. These bishops

eventually died, were exiled, returned to the New Calendar under threats, and one isolated himself and refused to commune with the others, forming a faction. The last Greek bishop on the Old Calendar died in 1955.

Q. I thought a Church can't exist without a bishop? What happened then?

A. That is true, and for this reason, the priests formed a committee and approached the Russian Church Outside Russia (ROCOR) for help. Eventually, ROCOR bishops helped consecrate bishops for the Old Calendar Greeks. Some of it had to be done secretly as the State of Greece would try to arrest anyone being ordained. By 1969, though, once the situation was stable, the ROCOR issued all the necessary paperwork to demonstrate it accepted these ordinations and maintained full communion with the GOC.

Q. Why didn't the other Churches help the GOC?

A. Over time, other changes were introduced into the Orthodox Church to make it more modern, and attempts were made to reach out to other Christians in a process called Ecumenism. Ecumenism started off as a noble idea—try to get Christians back together—but being completely outnumbered and often intellectually overpowered, the Orthodox delegates (many of whom had studied in the West) gradually began to agree more and more with the non-Orthodox positions, rather than convincing the non-Orthodox to become Orthodox. The Orthodox Church confesses that it is the original Church of Christ, and therefore, there can be no compromise in matters of faith. These meetings were acceptable when it was simply people trying to overcome misunderstandings, but once joint prayers and joint statements began, the Orthodox delegates should have ceased. They did not, and began to more actively support such bodies, such as the World Council of Churches.

Q. You mentioned the Russian Church Outside Russia, but what about the one Inside? What did they have to say about this, since they stayed on the Old?

A. In the Soviet Union, the Church there had been overtaken by the Communists, and those who refused to cooperate went underground, living in secret. We consider these people the “Catacomb Church” and accept that they were Genuine Orthodox Christians as well. The State-controlled Church there was used as a tool to promote the Communist party, and as such could not be recognized as a truly Orthodox body. For all of these reasons, no support came to the Old Calendarists. In fact, the Communists intended to eventually change the Calendar there, too; it was switched in Bulgaria in 1968 as a test case, but the formation of an Old Calendar Church there in reaction made them postpone the plans.

Q. Communism ended though. Why is that still an issue?

A. Indeed, communism ended, but those bishops who had been installed by the Communists for the most part did not resign or repent. Generic “mistakes were made” type statements were issued, but no concrete repentance followed. Most communist-appointed bishops continued to participate in Ecumenism, and those nominally on the Old Calendar continued to support the New Calendar in places where it had been adopted.

Q. So it's not just about a Calendar then.

A. No, it's about a general process in the 20th century to Westernize and modernize the Orthodox Church, and to push it in to union with the non-Orthodox Churches by means of political compromises. The Calendar was in many respects the frontline of the battle; in fact, an Encyclical written by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 1920 "To the Churches of Christ Wherever They May Be" outlined the change of calendar as just one of several points in a modernization scheme. The Calendar, Ecumenism, and modernistic practices together have diminished the Orthodox faith, reducing it in many places to a purely secular and cultural phenomenon and hurting its spiritual power.

Q. Are you not recognized by the Greek Archdiocese (GOA), then?

A. The question might be posed in reverse: "do we recognize the Greek Archdiocese?" because we are, after all, the ones who remained faithful and did not change anything. But no, there is no mutual recognition between the GOA and GOC. Differing bishops and jurisdictions have differing views on the Old Calendarists from tacit support to sympathy to disdain. We do not base ourselves off of their recognition, however, since again we are the ones who kept the faith purely, and our ordinations were conducted by and canonically recognized in 1969 by the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia, which no one could deny was a valid Orthodox Church.

Q. What would I have to do to become a member of this parish?

A. You can speak with our priest about this in private. Our Church approaches the reception into communion of those coming from the New Calendar Church on a case-by-case basis. The process varies because the people vary. Our goal is to build up the Orthodox faith in you, which you may not have been taught completely elsewhere. We're not interested in criticizing your past, but instead on taking the foundation you've received and helping you grow in the Orthodox faith. We have to get to know you a little in order to do that.

Q. I can see this is a vibrant community and the people seem spiritually happy. I'm just not ready to commit because this is a lot of information I've never heard before. What do you recommend?

A. We are here for everyone, regardless of his or her affiliation. Christ teaches us to minister to one and all. You are welcome to attend liturgy, and participate as much as you are able as a guest. We do ask that you not approach communion in our Church until you've had a chance to make a decision and have spoken with the priest, but you are welcome to receive antidoron (blessed bread) at the end of liturgy. We are also happy to pray the Mnimosino or other prayers for you and your family. Take your time to get to know us, and we can provide you with any additional information you need.

Note: *This was a booklet originally prepared to distribute to those visiting GOC mission parishes from a New Calendar background, many of whom by this point were unaware that there even was such a thing as the Old Calendar Church. Its focus is pastoral in nature, rather than historical/doctrinal.*