

Your Name

Mr. Larson

Intermediate Computers

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## The History of Easter

### When is Easter

According to the New Testament, Christ was crucified on the eve of Passover and shortly afterward rose from the dead. In consequence, the Easter festival commemorated Christ's resurrection. In time, a serious difference over the date of the Easter festival arose among Christians. Those of Jewish origin celebrated the resurrection immediately following the Passover festival, which, according to their calendar, fell on different days of the week each year.

Christians of Gentile origin, however, wished to commemorate the resurrection on the first day of the week, Sunday; by their method, Easter occurred on the same day of the week, but from year to year it fell on different dates. An important historical result of the difference in reckoning the date of Easter was that the Christian churches in the East, which were closer to the birthplace of the new religion and in which old traditions were strong, observed Easter according to the date of the Passover festival. The churches of the West, descendants of Greco-Roman civilization, celebrated Easter on a Sunday.

### Council of Nicaea

Constantine I, Roman emperor, convoked the Council of Nicaea in 325. The council unanimously ruled that the Easter festival should be celebrated throughout the

Christian world on the first Sunday after the full moon following the vernal equinox; and that if the full moon should occur on a Sunday and thereby coincide with the Passover festival, Easter should be commemorated on the Sunday following. Coincidence of the feasts of Easter and Passover was thus avoided.

The Council of Nicaea also decided that the calendar date of Easter was to be calculated at Alexandria, then the principal astronomical center of the world. The accurate determination of the date, however, proved an impossible task in view of the limited knowledge of the 4th-century world. The principal astronomical problem involved was the discrepancy, called the epact, between the solar year and the lunar year. The chief calendric problem was a gradually increasing discrepancy between the true astronomical year and the Julian calendar then in use.

#### Later Dating Methods

Ways of fixing the date of the feast tried by the church proved unsatisfactory, and Easter was celebrated on different dates in different parts of the world. In 387, for example, the dates of Easter in France and Egypt were 35 days apart. About 465, the church adopted a system of calculation proposed by the astronomer Victorinus (fl. 5th cent.), who had been commissioned by Pope Hilarius (r. 461–68) to reform the calendar and fix the date of Easter. Elements of his method are still in use. Refusal of the British and Celtic Christian churches to adopt the proposed changes led to a bitter dispute between them and Rome in the 7th century.

Reform of the Julian calendar in 1582 by Pope Gregory XIII, through adoption of the Gregorian calendar, eliminated much of the difficulty in fixing the date of Easter and in arranging the ecclesiastical year; since 1752, when the Gregorian calendar was also

adopted in Great Britain and Ireland, Easter has been celebrated on the same day in the Western part of the Christian world. The Eastern churches, however, which did not adopt the Gregorian calendar, commemorate Easter on a Sunday either preceding or following the date observed in the West. Occasionally the dates coincide; the most recent times were in 1865 and 1963.

Because the Easter holiday affects a varied number of secular affairs in many countries, it has long been urged as a matter of convenience that the movable dates of the festival be either narrowed in range or replaced by a fixed date in the manner of Christmas. In 1923 the problem was referred to the Holy See, which has found no canonical objection to the proposed reform. In 1928 the British Parliament enacted a measure allowing the Church of England to commemorate Easter on the first Sunday after the second Saturday in April. Despite these steps toward reform, Easter continues to be a movable feast.

### Christian Origins

Easter is the annual festival commemorating the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the principal feast of the Christian year. It is celebrated on a Sunday on varying dates between March 22 and April 25 and is therefore called a movable feast. The dates of several other ecclesiastical festivals, extending over a period between Septuagesima Sunday (the ninth Sunday before Easter) and the first Sunday of Advent, are fixed in relation to the date of Easter.

Connected with the observance of Easter are the 40-day penitential season of Lent, beginning on Ash Wednesday and concluding at midnight on Holy Saturday, the day before Easter Sunday; Holy Week, commencing on Palm Sunday, including Good

Friday, the day of the crucifixion, and terminating with Holy Saturday; and the Octave of Easter, extending from Easter Sunday through the following Sunday. During the Octave of Easter in early Christian times, the newly baptized wore white garments, white being the liturgical color of Easter and signifying light, purity, and joy.

The Christian festival of Easter probably embodies a number of converging traditions; most scholars emphasize the original relation of Easter to the Jewish festival of Passover, or Pesach, from which is derived Pasch, another name for Easter. The early Christians, many of whom were of Jewish origin, were brought up in the Hebrew tradition and regarded Easter as a new feature of the Passover festival, a commemoration of the advent of the Messiah as foretold by the prophets.

#### Related Holidays and Festivals

Holy Week. In the Christian liturgical year, the week immediately preceding Easter, beginning with Palm Sunday. Solemn rites are observed commemorating the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Special observances recalling the institution of the EUCHARIST are held on Maundy Thursday; Scripture readings, solemn prayers, and veneration of the cross recall the crucifixion of Christ on Good Friday. Holy Saturday commemorates the burial of Christ; midnight vigil services inaugurate the Easter celebration of the resurrection. Holy Week is sometimes called the "Great Week" by Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians because it commemorates the great deeds of God for humankind.

Mardi Gras/Carnival. Mardi Gras is celebrated in Roman Catholic countries and communities. In a strict sense, Mardi Gras, or Shrove Tuesday, is celebrated by the

French as the last of the three days of Shrovetide and is a time of preparation immediately before Ash Wednesday and the start of the fast of LENT.

Mardi Gras is thus the last opportunity for merrymaking and indulgence in food and drink. In practice, the festival is generally celebrated for one full week before Lent. Mardi Gras is marked by spectacular parades featuring floats, pageants, elaborate costumes, masked balls, and people dancing in the streets.

Mardi Gras originated as one of the series of carnival days held in all Roman Catholic countries between Twelfth Night, or Epiphany, and Ash Wednesday; these carnivals had their origin in pre-Christian spring fertility rites. The most famous modern Mardi Gras festivities are those held in New Orleans, La.; Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Nice, France; and Cologne, Germany.

Ash Wednesday. In Christian churches, the first day of the penitential season of Lent, so called from the ceremony of placing ashes on the forehead as a sign of penitence. This custom, probably introduced by Pope Gregory I, has been universal since the Synod of Benevento (1091). In the Roman Catholic church, ashes obtained from burned palm branches of the previous Palm Sunday are blessed before mass on Ash Wednesday. The priest places the blessed ashes on the foreheads of the officiating priests, the clergy, and the congregation, while reciting over each one the following formula: "Remember that you are dust, and unto dust you shall return."

Lent. Period of fasting and penitence traditionally observed by Christians in preparation for Eaaster. The length of the Lenten fast, during which observants eat sparingly, was established in the 4th century as 40 days. In the Eastern churches, where both Saturdays and Sundays are regarded as festival days, the period of Lent is

the eight weeks before Easter; in the Western churches, where only Sunday is regarded as a festival, the 40-day period begins on Ash Wednesday and extends, with the omission of Sundays, to the day before Easter. The observance of fasting or other forms of self-denial during Lent varies within Protestant and Anglican churches. These bodies emphasize penitence. The Roman Catholic church has in recent years relaxed its laws on fasting. According to an apostolic constitution issued by Pope Paul VI in February 1966, fasting and abstinence during Lent are obligatory only on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.

Maundy Thursday. Maundy Thursday, or "Holy Thursday", the Thursday before Easter Sunday, observed by Christians in commemoration of Christ's Last Supper. The name Maundy is derived from mandatum (Lat., "commandment"), the first word of an anthem sung in the liturgical ceremony on that day. In Roman Catholic and many Protestant churches, the Eucharist is celebrated in an evening liturgy that includes Holy Communion. During the Roman Catholic liturgy, the ceremony of the washing of the feet, or pedilavium, is performed: the celebrant washes the feet of 12 people to commemorate Christ's washing of his disciples' feet. In England a custom survives of giving alms (called "maundy pennies") to the poor; this act recalls an earlier practice in which the sovereign washed the feet of the poor on Maundy Thursday. In most European countries, the day is known as Holy Thursday.

Good Friday. Friday immediately preceding Easter, celebrated by Christians as the anniversary of Christ's crucifixion. The name Good Friday is generally believed to be a corruption of God's Friday. Since the time of the early church, the day has been dedicated to penance, fasting, and prayer.

In the Roman Catholic church, the Good Friday liturgy is composed of three distinct parts: readings and prayers, including the reading of the Passion according to St. John; the veneration of the cross; and a general communion service (formerly called the Mass of the Presanctified), involving the reception of preconsecrated hosts by the priest and faithful.

From the 16th century on, the Good Friday service took place in the morning; in 1955 Pope Pius XII decreed that it be held in the afternoon or evening. As a result, such traditional afternoon devotions as the Tre Ore (Ital., "three hours"), consisting of sermons, meditations, and prayers centering on the three-hour agony of Christ on the cross, were almost entirely discontinued in the Roman Catholic church. In most of Europe, in South America, in Great Britain and many parts of the Commonwealth, and in several states of the U.S., Good Friday is a legal holiday.

"The History of Easter." July 4, 1776. <http://www.history.com>.