



Dear Parents,

Those of you who are new to St. Michael's have noticed that our calendar is different in several respects from a school calendar of a public or other private school. We wanted to take this opportunity to explain a bit about those differences.

Our striving is to have the school reflect, as much as we can, the world-view of the Orthodox Christian Church. This goal affects the atmosphere of the school, our teaching methods and even the school calendar. Actually, any school calendar reflects a world-view. Decisions on when school is in session and when it is not are made from a particular way of looking at life. The whole idea of many holidays comes from the celebration of holy days, which commemorate various events in the life of Christ. In earlier times, when God and the Church were more central in the lives of people, these holy days were not just "days off", but days of worship and festival. What is now referred to as Winter Break and Spring Break were once openly acknowledged as a recognition of the feasts of Christmas and Easter even by the public schools.

There are three factors which make our school calendar different from the calendars of most other schools. The first is that, for liturgical purposes, our parish uses the Julian Calendar rather than the Gregorian Calendar. This results in a difference in the time we celebrate the Birth of Christ, and therefore the vacation time during this season.

During the time of Christ and the beginning of the Christian Church, the world within the Roman Empire used the Julian Calendar, named after Julius Caesar who introduced it in 45 BC. The Julian calendar was in common use for both liturgical and secular purposes in the Christian world until 1582 when Pope Gregory XIII instituted changes designed to make certain corrections. One interesting change made at this time was that the beginning of the new year became January 1 rather than March 25.

Adoption of this new calendar was essentially immediate within the Catholic countries of Europe. They adjusted their calendar in 1582 by dropping 10 days from the month of October. In the Protestant countries, adoption of this new calendar came more slowly. England, and therefore the American colonies, did not begin using the Gregorian Calendar until nearly two hundred years later, in 1752. When George Washington was born in 1732, his family used the Julian Calendar. Many biographies state that he was born on February 22, but the actual date was February 11, the date

according to the Julian calendar. (The difference between the two calendars had increased to eleven days by this time).

The revised calendar was rejected in the Orthodox countries of the East because accepting it would alter the pattern of the celebration of Pasha (Easter) and interfere with the pattern of celebrating the major feast days and those of the saints. Serious theological differences between the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic church also influenced the rejection. All Orthodox countries (Greece, Eastern European countries, Russia, etc.) were using the Julian Calendar for the celebration of saints and feast days until 1923 when various jurisdictions adopted the Gregorian Calendar for these liturgical celebrations.

There is currently a difference of thirteen days between the two calendars. Although all the families of the school celebrate the Birth of Christ on December 25, for those of us using the Julian Calendar, our liturgical December 25 does not arrive until the Gregorian calendar date of January 7. The break is longer than other schools so as to provide for both situations.

The second factor concerns the calculation of the date for the celebration of the Resurrection of Christ. The Orthodox Christian Church uses a method slightly different from that used by the Roman Catholic and the various Protestant denominations. Although sometimes the celebrations are on the same date, most of the time this results in two different dates for the celebration. As you may imagine, this calculation, and discussions around it, have a long history. It is much too complicated to explain here.

The short explanation is that in 325 AD, at the First Ecumenical Council, (before there was a split between the East and the West), it was decided that the celebration of the Resurrection of Christ, (called Pascha in the Orthodox Church), would be determined by four factors. It would take place 1) on the first Sunday 2) after the first full moon 3) after the vernal equinox, and 4) must be celebrated after the seven day period of the Jewish Passover. At some point in history, the Christian denominations of the West stopped using the fourth factor in its calculations. Therefore, Orthodox Christians often celebrate the Resurrection later than other Christians. Sometimes the time difference can be more than a month. In 2008, the Orthodox Church will celebrate this feast four weeks later than everyone else.

The third factor affecting the school calendar is our desire to align ourselves with Orthodox spiritual practice throughout the year. The best way to explain this is with specific examples.

The six week period before the celebration of Pascha is known as Great Lent and involves special fasting and extended times of prayer. This is especially true of the first week of Great Lent, during which we strive to maintain a very strict fast and attend long prayer services each morning and night. For this reason, there are no classes for a portion of this week. It is time given for spiritual education. A similar time of fasting and prayer occurs at the end of Great Lent, during Holy Week. During this week we have no school on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday.

Another example is our approach to various secular holidays throughout the year - Columbus Day, Presidents' Day, Martin Luther King Day, etc. Generally there are no classes on these days, but sometimes we need to make a choice between the secular holiday and the Church Holy Day. On January 19, (which is January 6 on the Julian calendar), we celebrate the Baptism of Christ, a day we call Theophany, or "the manifestation of God". This feast involves the blessing of water, as Christ blessed the waters of the Jordan by His baptism. Our practice has been to go the ocean for a special service to bless the waters. We use that day as a field trip to take the children to the ocean (Doran Beach, which is generally very calm) and participate in the Church services of that day. It is a very joyful occasion and everyone is welcome to join us.

Finally, sometimes slight changes to the school calendar need to be made during the year. God has blessed us with good health, but there are times when we become ill and can not teach. Not being part of a large school system, we do not have a substitute teacher list and must unfortunately cancel classes when this occurs.

I hope this gives you an insight into our reasoning and decision-making concerning the calendar. If you have any questions or comments, please let me know. God bless you.

In Christ,

Fr. Dcn James