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Repeated calls for common Christian Easter date

by Cindy Wooden by Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY -- At a synod concerned primarily about peace and the continued presence of Christians in the Holy Land, one of the suggestions made repeatedly was that Catholics, Protestants, Anglicans and Orthodox finally celebrate Easter together each year.

"We truly hope for the unification of the Easter holiday with the Orthodox churches," Latin-rite Auxiliary Bishop William H. Shomali of Jerusalem told the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East Oct. 14.

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Celebrating Easter on the same day also implies observing Lent together, he said, which would give Catholics of the East and West an opportunity to witness together to their disciplines of Lenten fasting and abstinence.

"Just as fasting is a respected aspect of Islam and Judaism, we hope that Catholics of the Eastern and Latin Rites unify their way of fasting. This would be a positive sign for Christians and also for non-Christians," Bishop Shomali said.

The hope for a common Easter date was not mentioned in many of the formal speeches of synod members, but according to the English-language synod press briefer, it came up repeatedly in the hour of free discussion in the synod hall each evening.

For more than 15 years, the official position of the Vatican has been that it would endorse a universally

accepted plan to fix a date for Easter for all Christians.

The Middle East Council of Churches has been a leading promoter of a common Easter date, particularly in view of the fact that Christians are such a small minority throughout the region.

The World Council of Churches also has been trying to work out an agreement.

The North American Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation recommended early in October that a unified celebration of Christ's resurrection would demonstrate the unity of all of Christianity to the world. In "Celebrating Easter/Pascha Together," the consultation suggested using the most accurate scientific instruments and astronomical data available to set the date.

In a practice dating back four centuries to the reformation of the calendar by Pope Gregory XIII, most Protestants and Catholics celebrate Easter on one day, while most Orthodox observe the feast day according to the Julian calendar. The dates for Easter coincide every four years.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that some Eastern Catholics in predominantly Orthodox countries continue to follow the Julian calendar, while since the 1930s, some Orthodox communities have adopted the Gregorian calendar.

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At a World Council of Churches consultation in Aleppo, Syria, in 1997, participants agreed to use modern astronomical data in calculating the date for Easter based on a formula developed by the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in the year 325. The council set Easter as the Sunday after the first full moon in spring.

With very few exceptions, the agreement has not been applied. Part of the problem is that after five centuries of having different dates for Easter, some of the Christian faithful actually see "their" Easter as part of the substance of what makes them different from other Christians.

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