

# Christians of East, West seek common Easter

By Lynne Weil  
Catholic News Service

ROME — Leaders of Christian churches from around the world have shown support for a proposal to have a uniform date for celebrating Easter.

The initiative, which is being coordinated by the Geneva-based World Council of Churches, has resulted in numerous letters of approval by prominent church authorities, said Father Thomas Fitzgerald, an Orthodox priest and director of the WCC's Program for Unity and Renewal.

In an April 7 telephone interview, Father Fitzgerald said "it could be that in a few years Eastern and Western churches will be celebrating Easter on the same day."

Writing to the WCC, Cardinal Edward I. Cassidy, head of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, said "the Catholic Church is ready to endorse the conclusions of this consultation, and to work together with other Christians toward this much desired goal."

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 separately. In some years, the date coincides.

Easter this year, though, falls on April 12 for Protestants and Catholics, and April 19 for the Orthodox.

The WCC developed a proposal last year at a meeting in Aleppo, Syria, that a common date would be set for Easter starting April 15, 2001, and would be observed every year thereafter.

Participants in the Aleppo meeting agreed on a calculation of the date of Easter based on a formula developed by the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in the year 325. According to this system, Easter would always fall on the Sunday after the first full moon in spring.

The WCC sent a copy of the proposal to all churches that took part in the Aleppo meeting, and then to all of its more than 330 member-churches. The Catholic Church is not a member of the WCC, but works in cooperation with the organization.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople said in a letter to the WCC that the Council of Nicaea formulation offers "the only solution for a pan-Christian celebration of Easter on the same date."

Father Fitzgerald said letters of support had also been sent by authorities for the Russian Orthodox Church, the Syrian Orthodox Church, the Presbyterian Church of the United States and other Christian churches.

The issue "carries more weight in some parts of the world than in others," Father Fitzgerald said. "For example, in the Middle East, where there is concern for Christian witness, it creates a kind of scandal as seen by others, who might say, 'What are the Christians talking about if they can't celebrate their most important feast day at

the same time?"

He noted that in countries "where mixed marriage is fairly common, such as in the United States," households have been split over which day should be reserved for Easter commemorations — and in some homes, it is celebrated twice.

Father Fitzgerald said the target date of 2001 for starting the practice of common Easter celebrations "may be a bit optimistic" because "each church, with its own culture and structure of decision-making will have to decide on the plan "in its own time."

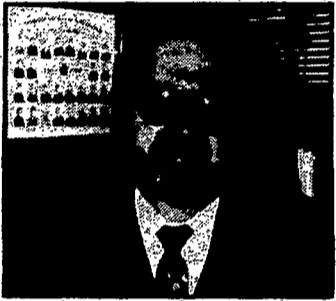
## Salvadoran guardsmen claim orders to kill churchwomen

WASHINGTON (CNS) — Seventeen years after four U.S. churchwomen were murdered in El Salvador, the national guardsmen convicted of the crime have said they acted on orders from their military superiors.

Maryknoll Sisters Ita Ford and Maura Clarke, Ursuline Sister Dorothy Kazel and lay missionary Jean Donovan were kidnapped, raped and shot dead Dec. 2, 1980.

Their bodies were found alongside a road the next day. The *New York Times* reported April 3 that in recent interviews with the New York-Lawyers Committee for Human Rights — which represents the families of the victims — and with the newspaper, the former guardsmen admitted being ordered to kill the women, contradicting previous claims by the U.S. and Salvadoran governments that they acted alone.

### Thoughts to Consider



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Funeral Director

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