

CONSTANTINE THE GREAT: IMPERIAL BENEFACTOR OF THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH

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One of the most significant figures of early Church history remains shrouded in mystery. Emperor Flavius Valerius Constantinus, better known as Constantine I or Constantine the Great, is important because he ended the imperial persecutions of the Church and unified the declining Roman empire. Yet comparatively little is known about him personally.

Constantine was born sometime between A.D. 272 and 288 at Naissus in upper Moesia (now Nish in Yugoslavia).¹ He was an illegitimate son of the pagan Constantius Chlorus (later to become the Emperor Constantius I) and Flavia Helena, whom Ambrose describes as an innkeeper. Apparently Helena was a Christian, and Constantius appears to have been tolerant of Christianity even though as emperor he reportedly destroyed some churches. Helena traveled widely, assisting Christians monetarily and through various personal services until shortly before her death at the age of eighty. The sources vary as to whether her son Constantine actually converted to the Christian faith, but his memory of his devout Christian mother appears to have been a factor in his own openness and kindness toward the early Church.

Constantine is described as being of medium height (or possibly taller) with a strong, athletic figure, piercing gaze, ruddy complexion, slightly aquiline nose and scanty reddish beard.² He possessed enormous self-confidence and a stately bearing to go with his great physical strength, combining a soldier's fearlessness with a diplomat's patience and tactfulness.

As a boy the future sovereign was sent to the eastern court of the empire, practically as a hostage to ensure his father's loyalty to the authorities in Rome.³ Later he accompanied the emperor Diocletian on his campaigns. By 302 he had attained the rank of *tribunus primi ordinis* (tribune of the first order) and had served under Galerius along the banks of the Danube. Three years later Diocletian abdicated, along with his imperial colleague Maximianus. Constantius Chlorus and Galerius then became *Augusti* ("rulers") of part of the empire while Severus and Maximinus Daia (or Daza) became Caesars over the rest.

Constantius promptly demanded that Galerius return his son to him. Constantine had to flee, carrying off Galerius' pack horses to avoid being pursued. Joining his father at what is now Boulogne in France, Constantine found his

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¹H. Stuart-Jones, "Constantine," *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (15th ed., 1947), 6. 297.

²E. C. Richardson, "Prolegomena" to Eusebius Pamphili, *Constantine the Great*, in Schaff-Wace, ed., *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (New York, 1890), 1. 435.

³H. Stuart-Jones, "Constantine," 6. 297.

father preparing to cross over to Britain to repel the Scottish-Pict invasion of that country. Constantius triumphed but died soon afterward at Eboracum (now York, England) on July 25, 306, only fifteen months after becoming one of the *Augusti*. Young Constantine attended his father on his deathbed.

By now Constantine appears to have reached fairly definite beliefs about such basic Christian doctrines as Christ's deity, atonement and physical resurrection, the Trinity, repentance and forgiveness, faith, love and eternal life. "He preached his faith on all occasions; he practiced thanksgiving and prayer abundantly. He regarded everything that he had or was as from God . . . , standing to modern statesmen as Athanasius to modern theologians," Richardson writes.⁴ Yet in keeping with the custom of that day Constantine postponed baptism until shortly before his death.

There is little to substantiate Constantine's actual conversion besides an often-told legend recorded by the contemporary Church historian Eusebius. The legend has it that Constantine saw a cross high in the noonday sky, standing high above the sun and bearing the inscription *En toutō nika* ("By this sign conquer"). Eusebius relates that Constantine and the imperial army beheld the sign in speechless wonder and that later the sign reappeared to Constantine in his sleep. On the latter occasion, it is told, Jesus Christ personally commanded Constantine to fashion a likeness of the heavenly emblem to use as a shield in battle.⁵

Constantine succeeded his father on the throne at the age of 31. Until now the empire had been ruled pretty much as one unit even though two or more princes shared the imperial authority. Diocletian had provided for the succession of the Caesars to pass in unbroken line to Severus. All this was to change, however, after Diocletian himself abdicated in 305. East and West now came under the control of two free and equal rulers, with a resulting struggle for power that ended only with the conquest of the last of Constantine's rivals in 323.⁶ When Constantius died his son Constantine was proclaimed by his own soldiers as the new emperor. While technically subject to Severus, Constantine quickly revealed his intention of being an independent sovereign. Soon afterward Severus was defeated in battle, captured by Maxentius and his father Maximianus, and executed. Maximianus then recognized Constantine as the new *Augustus* of the West (307). The alliance between these two men was confirmed through Constantine's marriage to Maximianus' daughter Fausta.⁷

Meanwhile Maxentius mercilessly persecuted his Christian subjects. "He cut open pregnant women," Eusebius writes, "and again inspected the bowels of newborn infants."⁸ His father Maximianus had carried out even crueler persecutions in the East. Pagan priests returned to their temples as heathen worship was revived and given into the hands of corrupt lackeys and court favorites. Stories

⁴E. C. Richardson, "Prolegomena," 1. 435.

⁵Eusebius Pamphili, *The Life of Constantine*, 1. 28, in Schaff-Wace, ed., *Select*, 1. 490.

⁶K. S. Latourette, *The First Five Centuries*, in *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* (New York: Harper, 1937), 1. 156.

⁷H. Stuart-Jones, "Constantine," 6. 298.

⁸Eusebius, *The Church History of Eusebius*, 8. 14, in Schaff-Wace, ed., *Select*, 1. 336.

are told of Christians burned at the stake, maimed, crucified, subjected to eye-gouging and sent off to forced labor in the salt and copper mines. Then the persecution waned, only to be followed by new horrors once Maximianus' second persecution began around 308. Christian corpses were left lying in the streets for the dogs and vultures. "Some said that limbs and masses of flesh and parts of entrails were to be seen even within the gates."⁹

Numerically speaking the Church was weakest in the West, although the persecution there was least severe. Galerius in the East remained openly hostile to Christianity, although he finally issued an edict of toleration from his deathbed in 311. His passing left four contestants for the highest position in the empire: Maximinus Daia (Daza), governor of Egypt, Syria and Asia Minor; Maxentius; Licinius; and Constantine. Like Galerius, Maximinus Daia persecuted the Christians until just prior to his own death in 313. The last of these persecutions during Constantine's early reign came under Licinius. He and Constantine divided the empire between themselves in 313; Licinius then ruled in the East until, as earlier noted, Constantine defeated and banished him in 323, two years before the Council of Nicaea.

Constantine also had vanquished his co-ruler Maxentius at the battle of Saxa Rubra, north of Rome, on October 27, 312. Constantine thereby acquired Rome, Italy and North Africa along with several strategic islands in the Mediterranean. This victory, Latourette states, sealed his friendship with his Christian subjects.¹⁰ Then early in 313 Constantine and Licinius met at Milan to draw up their famed Edict of Toleration, which they issued on June 13 from the city of Nicomedia in northern Asia Minor where the persecutions had begun only a decade before.¹¹ "What actually was done at Milan is in dispute," Latourette writes. "Some have denied that an edict was issued. The consensus of opinion holds that at least some important measures were there determined on behalf of the Christians."¹² Yet the edict is significant as the first proclamation of the doctrine of complete freedom of conscience and religious belief for the individual.¹³

As recorded by Eusebius, this edict decreed that Christians and non-Christians alike be allowed and even obligated to preserve and uphold their own faiths and assemblies. All would be free to practice the religion of their choice in piety and reverence toward God. Anyone so desiring might publicly convert to Christianity. Those Christian places of worship destroyed or appropriated during times of persecution were to be restored, and confiscated Christian property was to be returned or indemnified.¹⁴ Historically this appears to have been the first

⁹Eusebius, *Martyrs of Palestine*, 9, in Schaff-Wace, ed., *Select*, 1. 351. A footnote on this page, however, describes Eusebius' reporting of such events as "glaring and uncritical."

¹⁰K. S. Latourette, *First*, 1. 158-159.

¹¹G. Uhlhorn, *The Conflict of Christianity with Heathenism* (New York: Scribner's, 1879) 432.

¹²K. S. Latourette, *First*, 1. 157-159.

¹³Galerius had issued an earlier edict granting conditional liberty, but for only one faith and under limited circumstances.

¹⁴Eusebius, *Church*, 10. 5, in Schaff-Wace, ed., *Select*, 1. 379-380.

official statement of religion as the personal affair of the individual, free from outside control. Writes Uhlhorn: "The edict of Milan marks the great moment when the truth obtained recognition, that no one could be forced into a religion, because forced religion ceases to be religion at all."¹⁵

For Constantine "Christianity was to be the salt to preserve the State from the corruption of Heathenism." We should note however that, even with Constantine the undisputed master of Rome and the entire West, Christianity still was not the official religion of the empire. It had merely obtained imperial acceptance and protection.

Eusebius states almost ecstatically that under "the peace granted us by God" Christians enjoyed an era of unprecedented prosperity.¹⁶ Many who had sided with Maximinus and Maxentius were executed, particularly those who had won high official appointments after persecuting the Christians. Other ancient chroniclers record that Maximinus and Maxentius died lingering, painful deaths from consumption, delirium tremens and syphilis. Constantine's triumph, together with a widespread desire in the West to placate the Roman emperors and a fear of possible future punishment for sins committed in this life, helped accelerate the spread of the new faith.

Sporadic persecutions still broke out here and there. In some remote regions pagan protests resulted in the deaths of numerous believers. (J. L. von Mosheim adds, however, that "in propagating their religion [the Christians] were not always as gentle or as prudent as they ought to have been."¹⁷) In Persia Christians were persecuted long after Constantine's time when Jewish agitators and certain of the Magi caused their king, Longaevus, to regard the Christians as secretly allied with Rome and allegedly passing on valuable Persian government secrets via ecclesiastical spies to high officials in Rome and Constantinople.¹⁸ In the far west the Gothic ruler Athanaric harassed his Christian subjects. Generally, however, the believers across the empire were enjoying their new freedom from persecution and discrimination.

In March, 313, Constantine exempted all Church officials from public obligations including the holding of public office. He intended "that they may not by any error or sacrilegious negligence be drawn away from the service due to the Deity, but may devote themselves without any hindrance to their own law. For it seems that when they show greatest reverence to the Deity, the greatest benefits accrue to the state."¹⁹ By then one almost had to hold public office in order to pay one's taxes. Enough exemptions had been granted, however, so that many did not have to pay or to shoulder the same burdens as other citizens. Constantine's exemption of churchmen met with criticism and disdain outside of Church

¹⁵G. Uhlhorn, *Conflict*, 432-433.

¹⁶See esp. Book 10 in Schaff-Wace, ed., *Select*, 1. 369.

¹⁷J. L. von Mosheim, *Institutes of Ecclesiastical History, Ancient and Modern* (New York: Carter, 1869), 1. 228.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Eusebius, *Church*, 10. 7, in Schaff-Wace, ed., *Select*, 1. 383.

circles, although he had merely accorded to the Christian clergy the same rights that heathen priests and certain professions had enjoyed for many years.²⁰ Subsequently, however, many wealthy persons entered the ministry to evade their civic responsibilities, forcing Constantine to issue additional regulations limiting clerical exemptions and privileges.

The laws of the state were gradually becoming more humane. Executions by leg breaking were abolished along with the branding of felons on the forehead. Criminals who formerly would have been consigned to the gladiatorial contests now were sent to the mines, with a resultant decline in the notorious cruelties long associated with the arena. Prisoners in general were more humanely treated. Other laws were enacted upholding the sanctity of the family and the home, making adultery and seduction punishable crimes. Earlier discriminatory measures against the unmarried and the childless were repealed. The exposing of sickly and unwanted infants was ended, and provision was made for children whose parents could not support them. A program for the emancipation of slaves was enacted, with Christian priests performing the ritual of manumission in the churches. Only such manumission was permitted on the Christian sabbath along with agricultural labor. All courts and government offices were ordered closed on the sabbath. Soldiers on active duty attended services in the open fields.

Other rituals were used that were neither heathen nor completely Christian. These consisted chiefly of an invocation to a monotheistic Deity or Supreme Being invoking his blessing upon emperor and empire. Heathen worship was not at first forbidden, since the emperor had frequent contact with pagans. Later the pagan temples were closed and animals sacrifices were prohibited. "The State respected the religious freedom of the citizen, and did not regard it as its duty to convert him, but gave the Church a place, and left it free scope."²¹

Constantine provided for the excavation of the site of Christ's tomb in Jerusalem and ordered that a house of prayer be erected there. He did this partly in commemoration of the defeat of Licinius (323). Another magnificent church was built in Nicomedia. Several memorial statues to the Christian martyrs went up in Constantinople. The emperor destroyed the heathen altars and shrines that had gone up during persecutions, including one over Christ's tomb that had been dedicated to Venus.²²

In overseeing Church affairs Constantine made a curious division into "external" and "internal" administration. The latter designated purely religious and doctrinal matters, to be handled by Church councils and bishops; the former concerned Church life and discipline—e.g., ministerial disputes, property divisions, trespass arguments and the like, to be handled by Constantine himself. Whatever the emperor did not delegate to Church councils and bishops was arbitrated by his own councils and judges. Civil causes and common offenses among his ministers were judged by ordinary civil magistrates. The emperor's reasons for such procedures are not clear, and they were of dubious effectiveness since jurisdic-

²⁰Ibid., n. by A. C. McGiffert.

²¹G. Uhlhorn, *Conflict*, 435-436.

²²Eusebius, *Life*, 3. 25-50, in Schaff-Wace, ed., *Select*, 1. 527-532.

tions frequently overlapped. Bishops often had to intervene in property disputes; and Constantine himself, by convening the famed Council of Nicaea in 325, instigated the practice of settling doctrinal controversies (like the Arian-Athanasian struggles) under imperial auspices.²³ Apparently he considered the Church a sacred, autonomous republic within his realm. Whenever differences of opinion arose the emperor, "like some general bishop constituted by God,"²⁴ not only convened a synod but actively participated in its deliberations. The later growth and corruption of the Roman papacy probably had its inception during this period.

We should not be surprised that someone in Constantine's position should be highhanded. Once while entertaining a company of bishops he declared: "You are bishops whose jurisdiction is within the Church; I also am a bishop, ordained by God to overlook what is external to the Church."²⁵

The four major churches of the ancient world were those in Rome, Constantinople, Antioch and Alexandria. The Roman bishop had the highest standing and influence; the most luxurious church, vestments, and furnishings; the largest treasury; and the grandest style of living. Such things held a curious fascination for many, but they also led to dissension and, after Constantine's time, bloodshed—particularly whenever a new Roman bishop had to be chosen. The Roman bishop still did not enjoy anything like the supreme power of the later popes.

The Christian community continued to elect its own bishops and presbyters, with the former regulating religious affairs in their provinces and the latter acting as their counselors (or elders). The bishops gathered periodically in minor councils to which were added, by imperial decree, the assemblies or grand councils of the entire Church, the most notable being that of Nicaea. The presbyters, by constituting a council or a board of directors, assumed responsibility for providing services of worship as well as Christian instruction for new converts and for the young. They were the forerunners of our present-day church councils in local congregations (and in larger ecclesiastical units).

"There were never, indeed, any councils held, which could strictly and properly be called *universal*; those however, whose decrees and enactments were received and approved by the whole church, or by the greatest part of it, have been commonly called *ecumenical* or *general* councils."²⁶ Of the approximately three hundred bishops assembled at Nicaea, for example, only six came from the West.

Previous references to Constantine's banishment of Licinius in 323 did not mention the fact that by then the two men were brothers-in-law. Gradually, however, Licinius had become disaffected, believing that Constantine was far too generous in his treatment of the Christians in the East. Licinius knew that these believers were jealous of their western brothers and sisters who enjoyed freedom

²³J. L. von Mosheim, *Institutes*, 1. 231, 235.

²⁴Eusebius, *Life*, 1. 24, in Schaff-Wace, ed., *Select*, 1. 494.

²⁵Eusebius, *Life*, 4. 24.

²⁶J. L. von Mosheim, *Institutes*, 1. 235.

and peace such as Licinius never would have granted them. Licinius eventually came to believe that Constantine was conspiring with the Christians against him. He expelled from his own palace all who were known to be or even suspected of being Christians. Under the terms of the Edict of Milan he could issue no general decree of persecution, but he did attack—both overtly and covertly—several whom he suspected of disloyalty toward him including several eastern bishops, some of whom died under mysterious circumstances. Charging that the believers were not praying often enough for him, Licinius turned upon them with fury.²⁷ But thereby he ran afoul of Constantine who, together with his son Crispus, engaged Licinius in battle in September, 323, deposing him and assuming the rule over his eastern portion of the empire.

Mention of Crispus calls to mind another unfortunate affair that was to tarnish Constantine's reign. Crispus was the emperor's oldest son by his first wife Minervina. Born early in the fourth century, Crispus had become Caesar in 317. He had won a distinguished record in battle as well as for great personal integrity. Yet his own father had him put to death on charges of conspiracy and treason brought by the emperor's wife Fausta in 326. Constantine ordered his son's execution and later that of Fausta when it was discovered—too late—that Crispus had been innocent.²⁸

Apparently Constantine had no desire to force Christianity on his empire or the world beyond. The old statue of victory, the Pontifex Maximus, remained in the Roman Senate to receive offerings and libations. It still bore the title *Divus*, which indicated a heathen god with a pagan title. Constantine erected a colossal statue of himself in Constantinople that was actually an ancient statue of Apollo, beheaded and refurbished with an alleged fragment from the true cross of Calvary.²⁹ Eusebius quotes a letter, partly phrased as a prayer, which the emperor sent to his subjects:

My own desire is, for the common good of the world and the advantage of all mankind, that thy people should enjoy a life of peace and undisturbed concord. Let those, therefore, who still delight in error, be made welcome to the same degree of peace and tranquillity which they have who believe. For it may be that this restoration of equal privileges to all will prevail to lead them into the straight path. Let no one molest another, but let every one do as his soul desires. Only let men of sound judgment be assured of this, that those only can live a life of holiness and purity, whom thou callest to a reliance on thy holy laws. With regard to those who will hold themselves aloof from us, let them have, if they please, their temples of lies: *we* have the glorious edifice of thy truth, which thou hast given us as our native home. We pray, however, that they too may receive the same blessing, and thus experience that heartfelt joy which unity of sentiment inspires.³⁰

But when the emperor decided to wipe out the heresies he regarded as subversive, few such noble sentiments prevailed. He deprived the heretics of their meeting

²⁷Legends even had it that he dismembered them alive, tossing them into the sea for fish bait.

²⁸H. Stuart-Jones, "Constantine," 6. 298.

²⁹G. Uhlhorn, *Conflict*, 446-447. Uhlhorn feels that this Christian heart inside a pagan body was somehow symbolic of both the man Constantine and the age that fostered him.

³⁰Eusebius, *Life*, 2. 56, in Schaff-Wace, ed., *Select*, 1. 513-514.

places, including private homes, which he turned over to the Church while confiscating their possessions for the public service. Some heretics entered the Church out of fear of the emperor; the more noteworthy suffered banishment. As Richardson writes:

This famous "church unity," for which Constantine has been blessed or execrated, as the case might be, in all the ages since, was hardly more complete than modern unified churches where all the members hold different pet doctrines and are prepared to fight for them to the bitter end.³¹

Commenting on Eusebius' descriptions of the emperor's actions (in his *Life of Constantine*) Richardson concludes:

There is throughout this life a curious repetition in the details of action against heretics of precisely the same things which Christians complained of as having been done to them. The idea of toleration then seems to have been much as it was in pre-reformation times, or, not to judge other times when there is a beam in our own eye, as it is in America and England to-day,—the largest toleration for every one who thinks as we do, and for the others a temporary suspension of the rule to "judge not," with an amended prayer, "Lord, condemn them, for they know not what they do," and a vigorous attempt to force the divine judgment.³²

How may we evaluate Constantine's reign? The many inconsistencies in his record make such an assessment difficult. He combined a definite sympathy toward Christianity with many un-Christian decisions and actions. Generally a wise and humane ruler, he could display an incredible insensitivity as in the affair of Crispus and Fausta. He so tremendously increased his governmental authority during his 31-year reign as to establish the principle that the emperor's will is the fountainhead of all legislation. Stuart-Jones characterizes Constantine as "for ten years an excellent ruler, for twelve a robber, and for ten a spendthrift. . . . He was constantly forced to make fresh exactions in order to enrich his favorites and to carry out such extravagant projects as the building of a new capital."³³

Latourette is probably correct in saying that Christianity would eventually have triumphed without Constantine. After tyrants like Diocletian and Maximinus had abdicated, other persecutors of Christianity had to come to terms with the new religion purely as a matter of political expediency. Even Julian the Apostate had to confess on his deathbed: "Thou hast triumphed, O Galilean!"

Apparently every ruler of consequence had recognized that persecution had failed and that any one who hoped to control the Empire or even an important part of it must make his peace with the Church. It seems probable, therefore, that if Constantine had not come to power or had been less friendly some other ruler would presently have arisen who would have set about making Christianity the religion of the state.³⁴

On the other hand, if Constantine had *not* come along when he did the growth

³¹Footnote to Eusebius, *Life*, 3. 66, in Schaff-Wace, ed., *Select*, 1. 540.

³²Schaff-Wace, ed., *Select*, 1. 539 n.

³³H. Stuart-Jones, "Constantine," 6. 299.

³⁴K. S. Latourette, *First*, 1. 160.

and development of Christianity would have been quite different—in ways not altogether to the advantage of the Church. Persecution would have continued; the hardships of individual believers would have increased; and the doleful tendencies toward a state-sanctioned ecclesiastical establishment under Constantine would probably have surfaced under some other ruler. On balance we are entitled to regard Constantine as God's gift to his Church at that time, a man whose contributions generally were positive and sound and who must be reckoned with as a colossus in any survey of that period of early Christian history.