

# CHURCH HISTORY

"Now these things took place as examples for us..."

Lesson 6

## Emperor Constantine



Constantine ruled from  
306-337 AD

Though claiming to be a convert from 312, he was not baptized until upon his deathbed, an increasingly common practice. It was based on a misunderstanding of grace. People thought that you waited as long as you could so that as many sins as possible could be forgiven at baptism.

## The Church in the 4th Century Constantine and the Councils

Christianity has now survived for 2 1/2 centuries. Efforts to eradicate it have failed - miserably. It is slowly gaining acceptance by the masses, though opposition from government continues. The events of the 4th century will have a profound effect on the future of Christendom and all of western civilization

### The End of Persecution

As noted in earlier lessons, persecutions were usually localized and sporadic. However, at the beginning of the 4th century, one more great effort at exterminating Christianity took place under the emperor Diocletian. Diocletian wanted to preserve the traditional Greco-Roman culture, which rulers deemed necessary to keep the empire united. Diocletian saw the rising of Christianity as a major threat to its preservation. In 302, Galerius, with Diocletian's support, ordered the eradication of Christianity through a series of escalating edicts which directed:

1. Christian buildings to be leveled, Scriptures burned, and anyone appearing in a court of law had to sacrifice to Caesar (thus debarring Christians from the judicial system), as did anyone when challenged to do so (thus removing those who would not sacrifice from high office).
2. Governors were ordered to arrest and imprison bishops.
3. Bishops could be released if they sacrificed.
4. Sacrifice to the gods was made obligatory on everyone.

The persecution failed because, by this time, the citizenry in general had no stomach for persecuting people they now knew to be good, moral, law abiding people. Many Roman officials refused to carry out the edicts. Galerius admitted its failure, rescinding the edicts in 311. Christianity is gaining acceptance throughout Roman society. Although it is estimated they comprise only about 10% of the population, their influence far exceeds their number. Everything is about to change.



Chi Ro symbol for Christ seen in the sky by Constantine before battle of Milvian Bridge

### *Eusebius recounts the story of Constantine's experience*

While he was thus praying ... a most marvelous sign appeared to him from heaven ... when the day was already beginning to decline, he saw with his own eyes the trophy of a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, and bearing the inscription, CONQUER BY THIS. At this sight he himself was struck with amazement, and his whole army also, which followed him on this expedition, and witnessed the miracle."

This symbol spread like wildfire after this. It is composed of the first two letters of the name "Christ" in the Greek, one superimposed over the other

## Constantine - First Christian Emperor

All historians - secular or religious - recognize Constantine's conversion to Christianity as one of the great watershed events of western civilization. In 25 years Christianity goes from a movement to be eradicated from all reaches of the empire, to the dominant religion, accepted and practiced by the emperor himself. Constantine is the turning point.

He is the son of a Roman soldier (who becomes a Roman emperor) and a freedwoman named Helena - a Christian. Eventually Constantine becomes sole emperor. Before a crucial battle he claims to have what is essentially a "conversion experience" seeing the sign of the cross in the sky. Afterward, he begins to favor Christianity.

Scholars differ on the sincerity of his conversion. Some say he saw Christianity as a way to unite & preserve the Roman Empire and culture. This is the exact opposite of his contemporary Diocletian, who saw Christianity as a threat to the empire and its culture. It is certainly possible Constantine was converted but also understood Christianity was the means of uniting all the empire.

### "The End of Persecution

#### The Edict of Toleration and the Edict of Milan

In 311 all persecution of Christians is forbidden in the Edict of Toleration. It is issued by Galerius and rescinds his earlier edict of 302 designed to eradicate Christianity. Constantine's influence is already being felt. In 313 Constantine issues the Edict of Milan which gives Christianity legal status. It also directed Christian meeting places and other properties be returned and compensation paid by the state. But Constantine's political savvy is also seen in the edict. It not only grants legality to Christianity but to all religions. Thus, the Romans would see the edict as a general favor to all whose religious practices were outside the generally accepted religious practices of Romans.

#### The Church Councils of the 4th Century

Constantine is the first to call an empire wide meeting of the leading clerics. If Christianity is to serve his purposes it must be united. At the time it is doctrinally divided. Constantine sees the solution in calling a council of the bishops of the churches throughout the empire. They meet in Nicea in 325, not far from Constantinople.

#### Council of Nicea - 325 AD

We would think the doctrinal differences to be rather esoteric but were important in their setting. For example, this first council met to resolve disagreements in the Church of Alexandria over the nature of Jesus in relationship to the Father; in particular, whether Jesus was of the same substance as God the Father or merely of similar substance. The council decided against the second position (called Arianism) overwhelmingly. Of the estimated 250-318 attendees, all but 2 voted against Arius. Some other matters were discussed and the

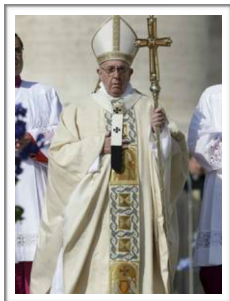
## Origin of clerical robes and vestments

The garments of the church leaders of the 2nd and 3rd century were everyday garments indistinguishable from those of the common man (although they were expected to be especially clean and in good condition). Any Roman of the period wore such garments.



Origen 185-255

In time the styles changed but the bishops and other officiants continued to wear the old style tunic and mantle. Over time this distinctive form of clothing became more elaborate and ornate, as the office gained greater importance. It is an interesting paradox that the dress of the common man was transformed into distinctive liturgical garments to distinguish the more important clergy from the laity.



Pope Francis

result is the Nicene Creed.

The council was historically significant because it was the first effort to attain consensus in the church through an assembly representing all of Christendom. With the creation of the Nicene Creed, a precedent was established for subsequent general councils. They would create statements of belief and canons which were intended to become guidelines for doctrinal orthodoxy and a source of unity for the whole of Christendom. This was a momentous event in the history of the Church and subsequent history of Europe. Despite the good intent Constantine may have had in calling this council, Nicaea was a culmination of the inevitable movement towards centralization of church's authority. At last one body of men had succeeded in speaking as the voice of the world church.

### The Council of Constantinople - 381 AD

The church was still not wholly united after the Nicean Council. Differences continued between the eastern church and the western church. This Council was called to address the nature of the Holy Spirit. But the most significant result was, the council's edicts received imperial backing "for its declaration that the statement of Nicaea was the one, lawful religion." Doctrinal power was now vested in the Councils (a form that will reappear later in church history) and the power of the clerical order was also in place.

We can see the beginning of the uniting of church and state. The main focus of the church shifts from humble spiritual service of disciples practicing Christian values to the exercise of power and fulfilling of political ambitions. The church becomes an arm of the government to expand its rule. And, eventually the pope will even supersede the emperor in power. The foundation of the modern Roman Catholic church has been established.

### Consequences of the 4th Century Changes

There are so many changes during this time. I will briefly list the most significant.

- Combining church and state - Constantine calls councils to settle religious disputes. He is no church official but takes responsibility to solve these disputes by calling clerics together to discuss and settle them. Although this first benefits civil government, it will eventually give greater power to the church.
- The power of religious councils is established.
- The convocation of bishops assume the prerogative of speaking for the universal church.
- Religious power is centralized - The supremacy of the Roman Bishop and See are established.
- Christianity becomes the official religion of the empire.
- The stage is set for further consolidation of power
- The influx of half converted pagans will lead to wholesale changes in worship and practice
- The church becomes more concerned with politics and power than

Christian values.

- The clergy/laity distinction is firmly established.
- The veneration of holy sites is begun - Constantine's mother, Helena, plays a major role in this.

By the end of the century almost every aspect of the church has changed. It is far removed from the simplicity of the apostolic church of the first century. With religious authority now removed from the scriptures and assumed by the church, it can only lead to further departures.