



From the Apostolic Age to the Medieval Church

CLASS 4 – OCTOBER 18:

CHRISTIAN EMPIRE? CONSTANTINE AND THEODOSIUS

The holy emperor has a great place in the church, for he is not like other rulers or governors of other regions. This is so because from the beginning the emperors established and confirmed the faith in all the inhabited world. They convoked the ecumenical councils and confirmed and decreed the acceptance of the pronouncements of the divine and holy canons regarding the correct doctrines and the government of Christians. They struggled boldly against heresies, and imperial decrees together with councils established the metropolitan sees of the archpriests and the divisions of their provinces and the delineation of their districts. For this reason the emperors enjoy great honor and position in the Church.

—Anthony IV, Patriarch of Constantinople, AD1395

...we are ever making intercession for all the emperors. We pray for them a long life, secure rule, a safe home, brave armies, a faithful senate, an honest people, a quiet world – and everything for which a man and a Caesar can pray.

Tertullian, Apology circa AD 200

I. ROME AND THE CHURCH:

- A. Pre-Constantine - AD70, the fall of Jerusalem, and the establishment of the Flavian dynasty's emperor cult:** The new dynasty in Rome brought the idea of monarch worship to the wider empire, thus bringing the Christian population into its first direct conflict with the imperial state.
- B. The Crisis of the 3rd Century AD235-284**
 - 1. Period of Civil War, Invasion, Plague, and Chaos that almost destroyed the Roman Empire:** During this period Rome was weakened as provinces seceded from the empire and within a 50 year period nearly thirty men claimed the emperorship.
 - 2. Stability restored under the Emperor Domitian (AD280):** Domitian's colleague Galerius promoted the idea that Christianity made the empire weak. Initiated the greatest persecution.

No ruler and all history has ever more fully merited his title of "the Great" for within the short space of some fifteen years he took two decisions, either of which alone would have changed the future of the civilized world. The first was to adopt Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. The second was to transfer the capital of that empire from Rome to the new city which he was building on the site of old Byzantium and which was to be known, for the next sixteen centuries by his name: Constantinople. Together, these two decisions and their consequences have given him a serious claim to be considered – excepting only Jesus Christ, the Buddha, and the Prophet Mohammed – the most influential man in all history...

—John Julius Norwich, historian

II. CONSTANTINE THE GREAT

- A. Possible early exposure to Christianity during his upbringing**
- B. The Tetrarchy & Diocletian Persecution:** In the Western portion of the empire under Constantine's father, the Emperor Constans, the persecution of Christians was halfhearted. The persecution created controversy over how to treat lapsed believers and clergy who repented and came back to the Church.
- C. Constantine's Civil Wars and Religious Policy:** His religious policy changed as his power increased. AD306 Usurper/Caesar; AD310 one of the emperor's in the West; AD312 sole emperor in the West (Milan); AD324 sole Roman Emperor (Nicaea).
- D. The Church's Response to Constantine and the Conflict between Arias and Athanasius:** Nicaea was a temporary victory but a helpful one. Arias' sympathizers at court inadvertently supported Arian scheming and resulted in the first of five exiles for Athanasius, and a setback for the Nicene cause.

Christianity became fashionable and received many halfhearted converts. The Church canonized Constantine and his mother Helena as saints. The Church accepted the right of bishops to hear legal appeals. Identification with Rome was not cost free, as some believers were martyred by Rome's enemies due to the imperial association.

He [Julian] had found by experience that no wild beast are so hostile to men as are Christian sects in general to one another.

—*Ammianus, AD4th century historian*

III. THE HEATHEN RESPONSE

- A. **Julian the Apostate:** Final pagan Emperor, neoplatonic philosopher, and reformer of the Pagan religion. Did not persecute the Church directly. Attempted Pagan restoration/deChristianization. Died in battle against the Persians after their peace agreement broke down.
- B. **The Church's Reaction to Julian:** A sophisticated opponent who was intent on driving Christians out of the leadership class of the empire yet helped the Church by ending the exile of many prominent Nicene proponents.

I know of no bishop worthy of the name, except Ambrose.

—*Theodosius I, emperor of the Romans*

IV. THE CHURCH DURING THE CONTINUED DECLINE OF ROME

- A. **Theodosius' Imperial Settlement:** Edict of Thessalonica AD380 Christianity was made the sole official religion of the empire. Paganism suppressed. Despite imperial sponsorship, churchmen like Ambrose of Milan maintained their freedom to act and even chastised imperial authorities when they sinned. The Church was built on martyrs not careerists. Though on occasion some clergy compromised with the state, the emperor did not control the Church.
- B. **The Barbarian Threat to Orthodoxy and Empire:** Some of the barbarian tribes attacking the empire were converted to Arianism. Some Arian barbarian tribes were known to persecute Nicene clergy.
- C. **The Church's Reaction to Theodosius and the Barbarian Arian Menace:** Clergy largely supported Christianity's elevation to State Religion. Given the hostility of the Barbarians, in some cases defense of the empire was seen to coincide with the defense of Christian orthodoxy. The Church copied contemporary Roman military organization in the development of diocese (dioecesis) administrative apparatus. Bishops became part of the imperial edifice, though the Church remained distinct from it.
- D. **The Cotermious Conceit:** There was a mistaken belief in a direct link between the health of the Empire and the success of the Church. Saint Augustine argued against this conceit, and against the pagan libel.

He [the Devil] failed to get Jesus, but he came again, to get Jesus' church [via Constantine].

—*Upton Sinclair, The Profits of Religion*

V. INFLUENCES ON MODERN VIEWS OF THE CONSTANTINIAN SETTLEMENT

- A. **Catholic/Orthodox:** For the first 17 centuries he was considered a Saint.
- B. **Enlightenment/Secular:** Christianity weakened the empire, Christianity corrupted Constantine (Gibbon), popularity of the fictional *Da Vinci Code* narrative that Constantine "proves" the Christian religion is man made.
- C. **Protestant/Evangelical:** The period after Constantine led to Church apostasy, and corruption due to the desire for temporal power centered on the Papacy. (Luther, Calvin, Other Reformation thinkers.)
- D. **Anabaptist/radical (Reformation)** The Church fell only to rise again when the Anabaptist appeared in the 1500s. **(Recent)** A more sophisticated version was popularized by John Howard Yoder.

SUGGESTED READING

A Short History of Byzantium by John Julius Norwich

Defending Constantine by Peter Leithart

Christianity in Ancient Rome by Dom Benard Green