

His-Story

Church history and why it matters to me

THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH, PART I

aka: The Imperial Church
AD 305-476

I. Overview of this time period (from Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity*, Vol. 1)

Emperors	Bishops of Rome	Events
Constantine (306-337)	Sylvester (314-335)	Edict of Mila (313) Arian controversy begins Pachomius' first foundation (324) Council of Nicea (325) Constantinople founded (330)
Constantine II (337-340) Constantius II (337-361) Constans (337-350) Julian (361-363) Jovian (363-364) Valentinian I (364-375) Valens (364-378)	Marcus (335-336) Julius (337-352) Liberius (352-366) Felix II (353-365)	Arianism at its apex Augustine (b. 354) Pagan reaction
Gratian (375-383) Valentinian II (375-392)	Damasus (366-383) Ursinus (366-367) Siricius (384-399)	Eusebius of Caesarea and Athanasius d. 373) Battle of Adrianpole (378) Basil the Great (d. 379) Macrina (d. 380) Council of Constantinople (381)
Theodosius (379-395)		
Maximus (383-388)		
Eugenius (392-394) Arcadius (395-408) Honorius (395-423)	Anastasius (399-401) Innocent (401-417)	Gregory of Nazianzus (d. 389) Gregory of Nyssa (d. 395?) Martin of Tours and Ambrose (d. 397)
Theodosius II (408-450)		John Chrysostrom (d. 407)
	Zosimus (417-418)	Fall of Rome (410)
		Jerome (d. 420) Augustine (d. 430)

II. Constantine

- A. Pre-305, the Roman Empire divided among 4 emperors: Licinius, Maximinus Daia, Constantine, and Maxentius
 1. Licinius, Maximinus Daia, and Constantine respected each other, but considered Maxentius a usurper
 2. Maximinus Daia continued to persecute Christians in his regions
- B. Constantine's surprise attack on Maxentius
 1. Constantine mobilized his army in Gaul (France), crossed the Alps and attacked Maxentius

Notes

2. The night before battle, Constantine had a dream

- a. Had a vision (in the sky) of X and ρ superimposed (first two letters of the Greek word for Christ (Χριστος) with the phrase "in this you shall conquer"
- b. Had all his soldiers paint the symbol on their shields



- c. Some historians claim this even as Constantine's conversion (though it was actually more drawn out as Constantine continued to worship the "Unconquered Sun" after this initial experience)



3. Maxentius and his armies defeated (Maxentius died, having fallen from the Milvian Bridge)



C. Constantine became emperor of the western half of Rome

D. Continued campaign and made alliances with Licinius and Maximinus Daia: Edict of Milan (313)

1. As part of the alliances, Constantine insisted that all persecution of Christians be stopped
2. Churches, cemeteries, and other property of Christians that had been confiscated by Rome were to be returned

E. Civil war broke out between Licinius and Maximinus Daia: Maximinus attacked Byzantium (modern Istanbul)

1. Constantine went east with his army to assist Licinius
2. Defeated Maximinus Daia
 - a. Licinius took over all of the eastern empire
 - b. Constantine gave his half-sister, Constance, in marriage to Licinius
3. Murder plot on Constantine's life was discovered as coming from a relative of Licinius
 - a. This relative fled to Byzantium, and Licinius refused to give him up
 - b. Led to civil war between east and west Rome



F. Constantine attacked eastern empire

1. Licinius held out in Byzantium: waited on reinforcements from the sea (but they were ship wrecked)
3. Constance appeals to Constantine to spare Licinius in exchange for Licinius' surrender and abdication
4. Constantine honored request and became sole Caesar of the Roman Empire
5. Renames Byzantium to Constantinople (city of Constantine)
 - a. His dream to build a "New Rome" with Constantinople being the new capital and a powerful, monumental city
 - Strategic location: joined Europe to Asia
 - Expanded the city, built massive walls, fortified it with riches, homes,

Notes

people, and a large palace

- b. Wanted to use Christianity as the means to this end: claimed he was following instructions from God
- c. Pagan gods were abandoned; their statues removed to public baths, squares, or simply replaced or re-purposed (ex. large statue of Apollo replaced with a likeness head of Constantine and moved to Constantinople)

G. There is no doubt that the conversion of Constantine had enormous consequences for Christianity, which was forced to face new questions. What would happen when those who called themselves servants of a carpenter, and whose great heroes were fisher-folk, slaves, and criminals condemned to death by the state, suddenly surrounded by imperial pomp and power? Would they remain firm in their faith? Or would it be that those who had stood before tortures and before beasts would give way to the temptations of an easy life and of social prestige? Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity*, Vol. 1

III. Rome moving from paganism to Christianity

A. Constantine's conversion not the norm

1. The normal expectations for converts:
 - a. Put through a long process of discipleship and instruction (to make sure they understood what they were committing to)
 - b. Baptism came after this process
 - c. Their bishop became their guide and shepherd
2. Constantine's conversion
 - a. Never put himself under the instruction of bishops or teachers
 - b. Added Christians to his entourage
 - Lactantius, a tutor to his son, Crispus
 - Hosias, Bishop of Cordova, became a mediator for Constantine with other church leaders
 - c. Constantine considered himself the "Bishop of bishops"
 - Often intervened in the life of the church
 - Retained the right to establish his own religious practices
 - Repeatedly took part in pagan rites (his father had been a devout worshiper of the Unconquered Sun); church leaders looked the other way
 - d. Although Constantine professed Christ, he was never baptized (until on his deathbed)
 - e. Never eradicated the pagan gods of Rome, but placated many of the aristocracy and members of the senate, who didn't embrace Christianity
 - f. Constantine retained the pagan title of "High Priest"
 - g. Constantine: a true Christian or a prototype modern politician?
3. For him, the Christian God was a very powerful being who would support him as long as he favored the faithful. Therefore when Constantine enacted laws in favor of Christianity, and when he had churches built, what he sought was not the goodwill of Christians, but rather the goodwill of their God (Gonzalez).

B. Roman Catholicism begins to take shape

1. Constantine confers Pope Sylvester I (whose name is also spelled Silvester). He was Pope from January 31, 314 to his death in 335.
2. 324: Imperial edict for all soldiers to worship the Supreme God on the first day of

Notes

the week when Christians celebrated the resurrection of Christ (which also happened to be the day honoring the Unconquered Sun): hence “Sunday”

3. 325: Assembly of bishops in Nicea at the behest of Constantine; this became known as the First Ecumenical Council
4. The order to build new and elaborate churches (many times taking objects and material from pagan temples, which were in decay)

IV. Constantine’s Impact

- A. One of the results of the new situation was the development of what may be called an “official theology.” Overwhelmed by the favor that the emperor was pouring on them, many Christians sought to show that Constantine was chosen by God to bring the history of both church and Empire to its culmination, where both were joined. Typical of this attitude was church historian Eusebius Caesarea (Gonzalez).
- B. Others saw the emperor’s conversion and the mass influx into the church not as a blessing, but rather as a great apostasy (easy believism).
 1. As a result, many moved to the desert (deserts of Egypt and Syria) to live a life of meditation and asceticism
 2. With martyrdom no longer on the table, many believed they could continue their Christian training in the monastic life
- C. Some left the church altogether, seeing the Imperial Church as sinful and apostate
- D. A rise in intellectual activity: new theories, doctrines, and heresies the church would have to wrestle with

V. Why this segment of history matters (or *should matter*) to me

- A. How does this lesson enhance your knowledge of God?
- B. In what new ways are you challenged in your own walk with Christ?
- C. How might knowing this information help you to flourish further in the grace of God?

Notes