

CHAPTER 6 : CONSTANTINE AND THE RISE OF THE NOMINALLY CHRISTIAN ROMAN EMPIRE

The church rose from the stakes and massacres of Diocletian, to begin a new career, in which it was destined to triumph over the empire which thought that it had crushed it. For a short time Maximin, whom Eusebius calls "the chief of tyrants," continued in every way to oppress and vex the church in the East, and the cruel pagan Maxentius (a son of Maximian and son-in-law of Galerius) did the same in Italy.

But the young Constantine, who hailed from the far West, had already, in 306, become emperor of Gaul, Spain, and Britain. He had been brought up at the court of Diocletian at Nicomedia (like Moses at the court of Pharaoh) and destined for his successor, but fled from the intrigues of Galerius to Britain, and was appointed by his father and proclaimed by the army as his successor.

It is at this point in Constantine's life that he converted to Christianity, albeit tainted by superstition. Earlier in his life Constantine had struggled between heathenism and Christianity. His mother Helena had been a Christian influence upon him since his youth. Supposedly as he was passing the Alps to put down the very powerful and cruel tyrant Maxentius, who had made himself master of Italy, he beheld in the sky, at mid-day, a bright light shaped like a cross, and in glorious letters round it, the Latin words meaning, "In this sign thou shalt conquer." This vision made Constantine believe that the cross was truly the sign of salvation, and that He who could show such marvels in heaven, must be the true God. He set the cross on his standards instead of the Roman Eagle; and such great victories were vouchsafed to him, that by-and-by he became the only emperor, and put down all his enemies.

He crossed the Alps, and under the banner of the cross, he conquered Maxentius at the Milvian bridge near Rome, and the heathen tyrant perished with his army of veterans in the waters of the Tiber, Oct. 27, 312. A few months afterwards Constantine met at Milan with his co-regent and brother-in-law, Licinius, and issued a new edict of toleration (313), to which Maximin also, shortly before his suicide (313), was compelled to give his consent at Nicomedia. The second edict went beyond the first of 311; it was a decisive step from hostile neutrality to friendly neutrality and protection, and prepared the way for the legal recognition of Christianity, as the religion of the empire. It ordered the full restoration of all confiscated church property to the *Corpus Christianorum*, at the expense of the imperial treasury, and directed the provincial magistrates to execute this order at once with all energy, so that peace may be fully established and the continuance of the Divine favor secured to the emperors and their subjects.

Paganism made another spasmodic effort. Licinius fell out with Constantine and renewed the persecution for a short time in the East, but he was defeated in 323, and Constantine became sole ruler of the empire.

Constantine was not as yet baptized, but he tried to make the Christian church prosperous from his position as Roman emperor. This was certainly laudable, but Constantine's own ignorance of scripture often hindered his ability to rule wisely in this regards.

In truth the corruptions of the Christian church continued to make marked and rapid progress from Constantine onwards. False views of sanctification involving monasticism rose in prominence. The Bible began to be hidden from the people. And in proportion as the light, which is the surest guarantee of liberty, was withdrawn, the clergy usurped authority over the members of the church. Over time the canons of councils too often were put in the room of the one infallible Rule of Faith, instead of simply being summaries of it. The ministers of Christ began to affect titles of dignity, and to extend their authority and jurisdiction to temporal matters, forgetful that an office bestowed by God, and serviceable to the highest interests of society, can never fail of respect when filled by men of exemplary character, sincerely devoted to the discharge of its duties. The beginning of this matter seemed innocent enough. To obviate pleas before the secular tribunals, ministers were frequently asked to arbitrate in disputes between members of the Church, and Constantine made a law confirming all such decisions in the consistories of the clergy, and shutting out the review of their sentences by the civil judges.

Proceeding in this fatal path, the next step was to form the external polity of the church upon the model of the civil government. Four vice-kings or prefects governed the Roman Empire under Constantine, and why, it was asked, should not a similar arrangement be introduced into the Church? Accordingly the Christian world was divided into four great dioceses; over each diocese was set a patriarch, who governed the whole clergy of his domain, and thus arose four great thrones or princedoms in the House of God. The four patriarchs, or great Father Bishops, ruled over divisions of the Church at Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, and Rome. Where there had been a brotherhood, there was now a hierarchy; and from the lofty chair of the Patriarch, a gradation of rank, and a subordination of authority and office, ran down to the lowly state and contracted sphere of the presbyter. It was splendor of rank, rather than the fame of learning and the luster of virtue, that henceforward conferred distinction on the ministers of the church.

Rome itself was so full of the tokens of heathenism that Constantine had feared that his court would never be heartily Christian till he took it to a fresh place; so he resolved to build a new capital city for his empire. This was the city called after him, Constantinople, the city of Constantine, on the banks of the Bosphorus, just where Europe and Asia nearly meet. The chief building there was a church, named in Greek St. Sophia. The Bishop there was termed the Patriarch of Constantinople.

Another great problem for the church at this time concerned the heresy of Arianism. Arius, a priest at Alexandria, began wickedly to teach that our blessed Lord was not from all eternity, nor equal with God the Father. So many persons were led away by this blasphemous heresy, that it was resolved to call together as many bishops as possible from the entire church, to hold a General Council, and declare the truth based upon scriptural testimony. To his credit Constantine called the Council. The emperor came to

Nicea, in Asia Minor, in the year 325, and there met three hundred and eighteen bishops from every quarter, many of them still scarred by the injuries they had received in the persecutions, and many learned ministers and deacons, among whom the most noted was Athanasius of Alexandria. Constantine's admonition to them was thus: ""I entreat you, beloved ministers of God, and servants of our Savior Jesus Christ, take away the cause of our dissension and disagreement, establish peace among yourselves." Together, they drew up the two first paragraphs of the confession of faith called the Nicene Creed, and three hundred of the bishops set their sign and seal to it, declaring it was the truth, as they had been charged to hold and teach it fast, the catholic or universal faith. Arius was put out of the communion of the church, and all his followers with him.

But they were many and powerful; and in after times, Constantine became confused by their representations. He wrote to Athanasius, who had just been made Patriarch of Alexandria, telling him to preserve peace by receiving Arius back to communion. Athanasius refused to do what would have tainted the whole church, so Constantine banished him, and allowed Arius to come to Constantinople. There the heretic deceived him so completely, that he desired that he should be received back on the next Sunday.

While the faithful clergy wept and prayed that the church might be kept clear from the man who denied honor to the Lord, Arius went through the streets in triumph; but in the midst he was smitten by a sudden disease, and died in a few moments. This judgment convinced Constantine, and he held to the catholic faith for the rest of his life. He was baptized, and received his first communion on his death-bed. Constantine openly protected and favored the church, without forbidding idolatry, till his death (337).

Sadly, however, dignities and wealth now flowed in upon its ministers and disciples, and according to the uniform testimony of all the early historians, the faith which had maintained much of its purity and rigor in the humble sanctuaries and lowly position of the first age, and amid the fires of its pagan persecutors, became more corrupt and waxed feeble amid the gorgeous temples and the worldly dignities which imperial favor had lavished upon it.

But even still persecution of the Christian church was not entirely ceased. After Constantine came his son, Constantius, who was an Arian, and persecuted the catholics, though not to the death. Athanasius was driven to hide among the hermits in Egypt, and a great part of the Eastern Church fell into the heresy. Then, in 361, reigned his cousin, Julian the Apostate, who, from being a Christian, had turned back to be a heathen, and wanted to have the old gods worshipped. In hopes to show that the prophecies were untrue, he tried to build up the Temple at Jerusalem, but his diabolical efforts came to naught. Julian was very severe towards the catholics, and it seemed as though the old times of persecution were coming back; but after three years he was killed in battle, and the next emperor brought back the catholic regime. Athanasius finished this life in peace, and left behind him writings, whence was taken the creed that bears his name.

Thus the nominally Christian Roman empire became firmly established. While there were positive aspects about what had transpired in the course of transition from the pagan Roman empire to the nominally Christian Roman empire, it must also be said it included

the further corruption of Christendom. The "living oracles" of God's word were increasingly neglected, and the zeal of the clergy began to spend itself more upon rites and ceremonies borrowed from the pagans even more than before. These were multiplied to such a degree, that Augustine complained that they were "less tolerable than the yoke of the Jews under the law." At this period the Bishops of Rome wore costly attire, gave sumptuous banquets, and when they went abroad were carried in litters.

Riches, flattery, and deference continued to wait upon the Bishop of Rome. The emperor saluted him as Father; foreign Churches sustained him as judge in their disputes; heresiarchs sometimes fled to him for sanctuary; those who had favors to beg extolled his piety, or affected to follow his customs; and it is not surprising that his pride and ambition, fed by continual incense, continued to grow, till at last the presbyter of Rome, from being a vigilant pastor of a single congregation, before whom he went in and out, teaching them from house to house, preaching to them the Word of Life, serving the Lord with all humility in many tears and temptations that befell him, raised his seat above his equals, mounted the throne of the patriarch, and exercised lordship over the heritage of Christ. The gates of the sanctuary once forced, the stream of corruption continued to flow with ever-deepening volume. The declensions in doctrine and worship already introduced had changed the brightness of the Church's morning into twilight; the descent of the Northern nations, which, beginning in the fifth, continued through several successive centuries, converted that twilight into night. The new tribes had changed their country, but not their superstitions; and, unhappily, there was neither zeal nor vigor in the Christianity of the age to effect their instruction and their genuine conversion. The Bible had been withdrawn; in the pulpit fable had usurped the place of truth; holy lives, whose silent eloquence might have won upon the barbarians, were rarely exemplified; and thus, instead of the church dissipating the superstitions that now encompassed her like a cloud, these superstitions all but quenched her own light. She opened her gates to receive the new peoples as they were. She sprinkled them with the baptismal water; she inscribed their names in her registers; she taught them in their invocations to repeat the titles of the Trinity; but the doctrines of the Gospel, which alone can enlighten the understanding, purify the heart, and enrich the life with virtue, she was little careful to inculcate upon them. She folded them within her pale, but they were scarcely more Christian than before, while she was greatly less so. From the sixth century down-wards Christianity was a mongrel system, made up of pagan rites revived from classic times, of superstitions imported from the forests of Northern Germany, and of Christian beliefs and observances which continued to linger in the church from primitive and purer times. The inward power of religion was lost; and it was in vain that men strove to supply its place by the outward form. They nourished their piety not at the living fountains of truth, but with the "beggarly elements" of ceremonies and relics, of consecrated lights and holy vestments. Nor was it Divine knowledge only that was contemned; men forbore to cultivate letters, or practice virtue. Baronius confesses that in the sixth century few in Italy were skilled in both Greek and Latin. Nay, even Gregory the Great acknowledged that he was ignorant of Greek. "The main qualifications of the clergy were, that they should be able to read well, sing their matins, know the Lord's Prayer, psalter, forms of exorcism, and understand how to compute the times of the sacred festivals. Nor were they very sufficient for this, if we may believe the account some have given of them. Musculus says that many of them never saw the Scriptures in all their lives. It would seem

incredible, but it is delivered by no less an authority than Amama, that an Archbishop of Mainz, lighting upon a Bible and looking into it, expressed himself thus: 'Of a truth I do not know what book this is, but I perceive everything in it is against us."

Apostasy is like the descent of heavy bodies, it proceeds with ever-accelerating velocity. First, lamps were lighted at the tombs of the martyrs; next, the Lord's Supper was celebrated at their graves; next, prayers were offered for them and to them; next, paintings and images began to disfigure the walls, and corpses to pollute the floors of the churches. Baptism, which apostles required water only to dispense, could not be celebrated without white robes and chrism, milk, honey, and salt. Then came a crowd of church officers whose names and numbers are in striking contrast to the few and simple orders of men who were employed in the first propagation of Christianity. There were sub-deacons, acolytes, exorcists, readers, choristers, and porters; and as work must be found for this motley host of laborers, there came to be fasts and exorcisms; there were lamps to be lighted, altars to be arranged, and churches to be consecrated; there was the Eucharist to be carried to the dying; and there were the dead to be buried, for which a special order of men was set apart. When one looked back to the simplicity of early times, it could not but amaze one to think what a cumbrous array of curious machinery and costly furniture was now needed for the service of Christianity. Not more stinging than true was the remark that "when the Church had golden chalices she had wooden priests."

So far, and through these various stages, had the declension of the Church proceeded. The point she had now reached may be termed an epochal one. From the line on which she stood there was no going back; she must advance into the new and unknown regions before her, though every step would carry her farther from the simple form and vigorous life of her early days. She had received a new impregnation from an alien principle, the same, in fact, from which had sprung the great systems that covered the earth before Christianity arose. This principle could not be summarily extirpated; it must run its course, it must develop itself logically; and having, in the course of centuries, brought its fruits to maturity, it would then, but not till then, perish and pass away.

Looking back at this stage to the change which had come over the church, we cannot fail to see that its deepest originating cause must be sought, in the inability of the world to receive the Gospel in all its greatness, any more than the church that left ancient was immediately prepared to enter the Promised Land. It was a boon too mighty and too free to be easily understood or credited by man. The angels in their midnight song in the vale of Bethlehem had defined it briefly as sublimely, "goodwill to man." Its greatest preacher, the Apostle Paul, had no other definition to give of it. It was not even a rule of life but "grace," the "grace of God," and therefore sovereign, and boundless. To man fallen and undone the Gospel offered a full forgiveness, and a complete spiritual renovation, issuing at length in the inconceivable and infinite felicity of the Life Eternal. But man's narrow heart could not enlarge itself to God's vast beneficence. A good so immense, so complete in its nature, and so boundless in its extent, he could not believe that God would bestow without money and without price; there must be conditions or qualifications. So he reasoned. And hence it is that the moment inspired men cease to

address us, and that their disciples and scholars take their place – men of apostolic spirit and doctrine, no doubt, but without the direct knowledge of their predecessors – we become sensible of a change; an eclipse has passed upon the exceeding glory of the Gospel. As we pass from Paul to Clement, and from Clement to the Fathers that succeeded him, we find the Gospel becoming less of grace and more of merit. The light wanes as we travel down the Patristic road, and remove ourselves farther from the Apostolic dawn. It continues for some time at least to be the same Gospel, but its glory is shorn, its mighty force is abated; and we are reminded of the change that seems to pass upon the sun, when after contemplating him in a tropical hemisphere, we see him in a northern sky, where his slanting beams, forcing their way through mists and vapors, are robbed of half their splendor. Seen through the fogs of the Patristic age, the Gospel scarcely looks the same which had burst upon the world without a cloud but a few centuries before.

This disposition – that of making God less free in His gift, and man less dependent in the reception of it: the desire to introduce the element of merit on the side of man, and the element of condition on the side of God – operated at last in opening the door for the pagan principle to creep back into the church. A change of a deadly and subtle kind passed upon the worship. Instead of being the spontaneous thanksgiving and joy of the soul, that no more evoked or repaid the blessings which awakened that joy than the odors which the flowers exhale are the cause of their growth, or the joy that kindles in the heart of man when the sun rises is the cause of his rising – worship, we say, from being the expression of the soul's emotions, was changed into a rite, a rite akin to those of the Jewish temples, and still more akin to those of the Greek mythology, a rite in which lay couched a certain amount of human merit and inherent efficacy, that partly created, partly applied the blessings with which it stood connected. This was the moment when the pagan virus inoculated the Christian institution.

This change brought a multitude of others in its train. Worship being transformed into sacrifice – sacrifice in which was the element of expiation and purification – the "teaching ministry" was of course converted into a "sacrificing priesthood." When this had been done, there was no retreating; a boundary had been reached which could not be recrossed till centuries had rolled away, and transformations of a more portentous kind than any which had yet taken place had passed upon the church.

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