

CONSTANTINE FAVORS THE CHRISTIANS AND INAUGURATES A NEW ERA OF CHURCH HISTORY

The Catholic Church met the threat of disintegration from within by welding a system of authority out of bishop, canon, and creed. But an even more devastating threat came from without, in the form of the omnipotent Roman state. The persecution of the Church by Rome lasted over two centuries and contributed greatly to the spread of the Church the blood of martyrs being the seed of Christians, as Tertullian said. The era of persecutions ended not with a whim• per but with a bang when the Emperor himself, Constantine, went over to the side of the Christians.

Rome was tolerant in principle and allowed many religions to flourish. It only declared war on the Christians when it realized that their aim was total triumph over all other religions. The first recorded incident of persecution by the Roman Government was Nero's action in 64. There is no reason for supposing that the Emperor based himself on an edict drawn up to proscribe Christianity. He merely exploited public opinion, which

saw Christians as atheists and moral monsters because of their refusal to join in pagan worship and because of the secrecy with which they surrounded their own services.

It was not until the third century that the Roman Government decided seriously to deal with the Christian menace. The issue was basically religious: The Christian Gospel proclaimed the reality of the one true God and hence demanded absolute rejection of the gods worshiped by Rome. Moreover, Christians took a relative view of the authority of the Emperor and Empire, which were only to be obeyed when they were in harmony with the will of the one true God, which had been revealed to his Church.

Edicts were now issued that forced the provincial governors to persecute Christians. Septimius Severus (193-211) was the first to issue such an edict. Powerful written protests against the cruelty of this persecution were penned by Tertullian in his *Ad Nationes* (195) and *Ad Scapulam*. (211). This persecution subsided with the advent of a new Emperor, Alexander, a gentle and virtuous person who placed Jesus in his domestic pantheon with the other Roman gods. Alexander's assassination and the accession of Maximin in 235 again kindled the fires, but when Philip the Arabian (244-49), an Emperor friendly to the Christians, came to power, peace again ensued.

It lasted only a few years, for Decius (249-51) succeeded to the throne. He was another harsh persecutor who saw the Christian sect as a terrible poison to the ancient Roman morals and ordered all suspects to make a public act of homage to the gods. Great numbers of Christians apostatized when faced with the rack, but many important Church leaders, including Pope Fabian, suffered heroically and died at the hands of their torturers. Once things cooled down, the apostates begged for readmission to communion-creating grave pastoral problems for bishops like Cyprian of Carthage.

Persecution flared again and numbered among its victims Cyprian as well as Pope Sixtus II and his deacon Lawrence. But the zeal of the persecutors slackened, and for nearly a half century the Church was left undisturbed.

The final persecution of the Church began with a devastating intellectual assault by the pagan intelligentsia led by Porphyry (d. 303). In his work *Against the Christians*, Porphyry held Christ up to scorn as a pitiful weakling, attacked the Scriptures as full of absurdities and patent contradictions, scoffed at the Eucharist, and ridiculed the Christian works of mercy. This was the prelude to the attack launched by Diocletian, a strong and industrious ruler who had carried through a radical reorganization of the Empire; he divided it into 101

provinces and 12 dioceses, placing two co-emperors in supreme command, with imperial headquarters at Milan in the West and Nicomedia in the East.

The new system was designed to meet the extreme peril now facing the Empire from the hordes of barbarians pounding at her gates. Insecurity had become a way of life; inter-course among the cities was no longer safe, taxes skyrocketed, larger armies were required, the amenities of life disappeared, and people tried to save their skins as best they might. It was very tempting to blame the Christians for all the trouble, since their very existence could be regarded as a standing insult to the gods. The fact that so many of them even held high posts in the government and the army aggravated the offense.

Then at a public sacrifice a pagan priest claimed that the presence of Christians at the ceremony invalidated the sacrifice and thus endangered the state. It was the final straw. By a decree of February 303, Diocletian ordered all Christian places of worship to be destroyed and their sacred books handed over; Christians were forbidden to assemble and whereto be denied the protection of the laws.

The first church destroyed was an imposing edifice that stood adjacent to the royal palace itself in Nicomedia; the Emperor watched from a window as his soldiers broke

down the church's doors and ransacked the place, burning the ornaments and holy Scriptures.

With this act the final agony of the Church began; it was to last from 303 to 312. A second, more severe decree singled out bishops, priests, and deacons for special attention, while later great numbers of Christians in all ranks were seized. They had their eyes and tongues gouged out, their feet sawed off; they died at the stake or in a red-hot chair. Some were thrown to wild beasts to entertain a holiday mob; others were starved to death or thrown into dungeons.

The struggle for the soul of the Empire raged on a vast scale, for though only a sprinkling in the West, Christians in the East numbered around 10 per cent of the population, and in some cities even formed the majority. And it was mainly in the East that the blood flowed—under Calerius (Diocletian's successor) and Maximinus Daia. It all came to a halt suddenly when Galerius by decree of 311 permitted Christians to resume their religious assemblies. But a cruel reversal occurred when Galerius died and Maximinus Daia once more called for Christian blood. But then just as suddenly he ordered the whole business to cease again. It was puzzling until observers learned that pressure to stop persecuting had been put on Maximinus by the new conqueror of Italy and Africa, Constantine, who was now sole master of the

Western world. The son of the co-Emperor Constantius Chlorus, Constantine was hailed as Emperor by his troops on the death of his father in 306 but immediately had to face a rival, Maxentius, who had managed to secure Rome as his stronghold.

When Constantine finally emerged victorious in 312, he attributed his victory to the help of the Christian God. According to the Christian writer Lactantius (d. 320), on the eve of Constantine's fateful battle with Maxentius, Constantine had a vision of Christ, who told him to ornament the shields of his soldiers with the Savior's monogram-the Greek letters chi and rho. Constantine obeyed and in the ensuing battle was victorious as promised. Writing somewhat later, Eusebius, in his *Life of Constantine*, gave a more sensational account: Constantine and his whole army saw a luminous cross appear in the afternoon sky with the message "in this conquer."

It seems probable that Constantine was moved by some unusual religious experience to turn to the God of the Christians, a move no doubt facilitated by the vague monotheism he embraced in his early years. It did not mean an immediate full-fledged conversion to Christianity-Constantine was not even baptized until his final illness. But during the next decade he showed increasing signs of favor to the Christians. He met with the ruler of the eastern

half of the Empire at Milan in early 313, and in February the two reached agreement on a policy of complete religious tolerance; Christians were even to receive back their property.

At first Constantine observed an attitude of formal correctness toward paganism. He remained its Supreme Pontiff, paid homage to the sun god on the official coinage, and in general was careful not to alienate the pagan masses and aristocracy of Rome. But he gradually revealed his true feelings. He imposed restrictions on pagan practice and publicly displayed the Christian symbols. He attached the standards of the army to a cross emblazoned with the monogram of Christ and issued coins picturing himself wearing a helmet stamped with the same monogram. Moreover, he increasingly identified the interests of the state with those of Christianity. Anxious to secure unity in the Church as well as the state, he did not hesitate to intervene in Church affairs and tried to use the power of the state to end the Donatist schism in Africa.

Constantine was faced with an even more serious question of Church unity in 324 on his assumption of rule over the whole Empire. It had to do with trouble in Alexandria, Egypt, where the presbyter Arius challenged his bishop, Alexander, on the question of God the Son's relation to God the Father. The Emperor at first tried to

pacify the disputants by urging them to tolerate differences on minor points of doctrine, but as the controversy increased in violence, he finally gathered some 220 or so bishops together in the first general or ecumenical council, at Nicaea, on May 20, 325. The Emperor exhorted the bishops to maintain peace and unity and even took part, it seems, in the debates. But the matter could not be settled so easily; indeed, the controversy remained unsettled at the time of his death.

The Emperor showed great generosity to the Church in lavishing donations on it and erecting numerous sumptuous basilicas, including the magnificent one over the supposed site of the tomb of Peter at Rome and another over the tomb of Christ in Jerusalem. He surrendered his Lateran palace in Rome to the bishop of Rome for a residence, and it remained the papal residence until 1308. When in 324 he moved the capital of the Empire to Byzantium, which was renamed Constantinople after him, he erected numerous churches there, including the two great ones dedicated to peace and to the holy apostles.

Constantine bestowed important privileges on the Christian clergy: They were recognized as a distinct social class and exempted from military service and forced labor. He invested the judicial decisions of the bishop with civil authority. He modified the Roman Law in the

direction of Christian values. Sunday, the day when Christians assembled, was made a day of rest. Sexual offenses, such as adultery, concubine age, and prostitution, were treated more severely. On the other hand, a more humane attitude was shown toward slaves (their families could not be broken up), children, orphans, and widows. Under Constantine the Church was firmly set on the road to union with the state. He was thus in a real sense the architect of the Middle Ages.

This alliance with the state profoundly influenced every aspect of the Church's thought and life. It carried many advantages, but it also entailed some serious drawbacks: infringements on the Church's freedom as civil authorities exploited the relationship for political purposes; mass conversions where social conformity was the chief motivating factor; the widening of the gap between clergy and laity thanks to the official status conferred on them; persecution of dissenters as a menace to the unity of the state. The Church would never be the same again-for better and for worse-and so Constantine's conversion is certainly one of the greatest turning points in the history of the Church and of the world.