

CONSTANTINE THE GREAT
(306-337)

After the death of Emperor Diocletian, there were as many as six emperors simultaneously over the Roman Empire. In reality, any general commanding an army was a candidate for the imperial throne. One allowed oneself to be proclaimed emperor by one's troops, and if one were lucky enough to maintain one's position, one became emperor for a shorter or longer period. Constantine was the fortunate victor over his rivals and therefore could wield the scepter supremely over the vast Roman Empire.

Few rulers have been judged so differently. If we listen to Christian historians, the liberator of the church is attributed all the qualities of a hero, even of a saint. In contrast, others portray him as one of the most hideous tyrants, who, through their softness and vice, dishonored the imperial purple. It seems that nature had endowed him with the most fortunate gifts. In his youth, he managed to preserve his strength by living a moderate and restrained life. Brave in war, he was adored by his soldiers, but his unbridled ambition knew no bounds. Had he fallen prematurely in one of the many battles, he would have been recorded in history as an excellent general who promised much for the future, but he is also one of the many examples that prove how power completely corrupts a person. What a completely different person the Constantine of youth is than that of old age! Cruel, bloodthirsty, and consumed by ambition, no means were low enough, as long as it offered a chance to bring him to his goal. A calm historian like Gibbon says that we "may regard him as a hero, who inspired love in his subjects and terror in his enemies, but who degenerated into a cruel and dissolute monarch, corrupted by fortune or by conquest, driven to dissimulation beyond necessity." To form a faint impression of him, it suffices to cite the following as examples from his life: he had a father-in-law whom he forced to hang himself; he had a brother-in-law whom he strangled; he had a nephew aged 12 or 13 whom he had killed; he had an eldest son whom he beheaded; he had a wife whom he suffocated with hot water in a bath. After such a description of undisputed facts, it is legitimate to weigh whether we have before us a beast or a human being. And such a man, who trampled on all Christian virtues, is exalted to the skies by Christians, simply because he was baptized as a Christian and thus, after many persecutions, brought victory to the Christian church over the pagans. One can commit all kinds of crimes, one can run a household like a beast, one can trample all the laws of morality—no problem, as long as one bestows great boons upon the church, then one is portrayed as a model human being, whose sins, though red as blood, are made as white as wool. "Shining sins" are then called those things that others label as crimes.

Knowing how he hunted a band of Franks living in those regions on the banks of the Rhine, and when he captured their princes, he fed them to the wild beasts for his own amusement—to expect humanity from such a man is more than can reasonably be expected. His father was in England, where he had assumed the title of emperor for a few months. He requested permission from Emperor Galerius, with whom he was then staying in Asia Minor, to visit his sick father, and he made the journey with the imperial posthorses. However, being a posthorse was just as dangerous as being a member of Constantine's family, for he had their kneecaps cut after they had served, fearing he would be recalled. He found his father dying and had himself proclaimed emperor by the Roman troops in England. The Senate in Rome was not satisfied with this but proclaimed Maxentius emperor. Christian historians call him a tyrant and usurper because fortune did not favor him. For had he remained victorious, Constantine would have been known as a tyrant. His policy led him to side with the Christians, and Christian historians recount how he supposedly saw in the sky the great sign of the emperors, called the Labarum, bearing a cross and the words: "By this you shall conquer." 1)

Strange that Eusebius, in his Life of Constantine, recounts that the emperor told him this 55 years later in a confidential conversation and confirmed it under oath! And this while the entire army had seen that sign in the sky just as clearly as he had! Maxentius was drowned. And so Constantine got rid of this troublesome rival, but when one reads that, despite such a clear sign in the heavens, he supposedly celebrated his victory in Rome with all the usual forms of pagan worship, the whole story becomes questionable. The Senate, which had previously refused him, now paid him every tribute, even going so far as to erect a golden statue for him, something they did only for the gods. He accepted all this, including the title of high priest, which he retained for life, despite the rumored preference for Christianity. He knew how to derive as much benefit from both paganism and Christianity as possible for himself.

He did not seem to see clearly at the time which side would be most advantageous for him, and therefore he wavered between hope and fear, as is evident from two decrees he issued that same year: the first prescribed the solemn observance of Sunday—note that he called the Lord's Day the Day of the Sun, again to please Christians and not offend pagans—and the second to prescribe the regular consultation of the Auruspices (pagan priests). Now he had only one rival left, namely Licinius, but his power was not yet great enough to immediately dismiss him. Therefore, he allied with him, and in the Edict of Milan, these two granted their subjects the freedom to follow the religion they most strongly held. After the defeat of Licinius, whom he had murdered despite his oath to spare him, he exhorted his subjects to follow their emperor's example and "embrace the divine truth of Christianity." One historian recounts that the pagan priests refused to absolve him of guilt after he had murdered his son, nephew, and wife, and that he therefore adopted the more lenient faith of the Christians, for the Christian priests offered him no obstacles. They were thus far inferior to their pagan colleagues. Although this is questioned, we nevertheless believe it quite possible that there is some truth to this story. In any case, it is a fact that the Christians were somewhat pleased that the emperor, a murderer of women and children, opened and attended the famous Council of Nicaea, proof that he was eagerly accepted into the Christian community. It is certain that only political motives moved the base hypocrite to join forces with the Christians, and that no conviction whatsoever was involved.

Moreover, the bloodthirsty beast never knew anything resembling conviction. Mosheim, the historian, quite rightly says: the emperor had enough sense to see that Christianity possessed a great deal of power, and idolatry had no purpose whatsoever in strengthening public authority and binding citizens to "their duty." Gibbon also recognized this when he says: "The emperor's throne would be established on a firm and lasting foundation if all his subjects, by embracing the Christian religion, would learn to suffer and obey." He needed docile and obedient subjects above all, and the religion that could provide them was, in his eyes, the best.

The best part is that, although high priest of the pagans, he presided over a Christian church council, and that the Christians tolerated this proves how much they had deteriorated in character and dignity.

He postponed his baptism until the last moment because he feared he would not be absolved from the sins he would subsequently commit. When the emperor showed such strong inclinations toward Christianity, the courtiers naturally followed suit, but he who used religion as a political instrument of government made of it what he wished, and the priests submitted to his will. His son Constantius is said to have once said: "What I will must be the law of the church." The same was true of Constantine. Therefore, no one had more influence on the formation of the Christian church than this emperor. He was an unmitigated ruler in both political and ecclesiastical matters. The last vestiges of the ancient Roman republican essence disappeared completely under him!

Indeed, by transferring the seat of government to Byzantium, which he renamed Constantinopolis (city of Constantine), he effectively dealt the final blow to the Roman Empire, as everything was now modeled on Persian principles. In his time, those systematic persecutions for disbelief and heresy began, which are a peculiar characteristic of dogmatic Christianity. It is a sad truth that the Christians displayed far greater cruelty towards each other for disagreeing than the unbelievers ever showed towards them. Constantine incorporated the principle of persecution for the sake of faith into Roman law. Renan rightly says: "We will search in vain through all Roman law before Constantine to find a single provision against freedom of thought, and the history of imperial government provides no evidence of persecution for adhering to an abstract doctrine." Thus, Constantine opened a new era of spiritual slavery, laid the foundation of the Inquisition, which later flourished so much, and favored tyranny.

From that time on, as Draper rightly says, Christianity took a direction that marked its entire future course and became a stumbling block on the path of European spiritual progress for more than 1,000 years. Constantine wanted to be in charge of everything, in both the church and the state. He was seen summoning more than 300 bishops to his palace, and appearing at the meeting wearing his diadem and adorned with precious stones, he decreed that Jesus would be equal to God (homo-oesios), and all who disagreed, the Arians, were cursed and persecuted. And soon, when his interests led him to side with the Arians, Jesus became equal (homoi-oesios), and the persecutions began in reverse.

From oppressed, the Christians became oppressors, who pronounced death sentences on anyone who dared to differ with the dominant faction.

Finally, when the villain felt his end approaching and, burdened by his baseness and crimes, feared death, he was baptized, because the Christian priests had convinced him that he could then lay down his head in peace and free from sin. He toyed with religions, since none of them actually mattered to him. Politics drove him into the arms of the Christian church, and out of politics, he stopped at nothing. Without principles and driven by an insatiable ambition, he subordinated everything to his interests. He committed almost no baseness; he proved capable of no crime. But he had made sure to have the priests on his side, and they stopped at nothing. After all, he was buried in a Christian church, and the faithful paid divine honors to his name and his image, calling him a saint, equal to the apostles. And the clergy, knowing that he had committed the most heinous crimes during his lifetime, went so far as to declare that God, out of special grace, had endowed his tomb and his statue with miraculous power, so that anyone who touched them was healed of all ailments and infirmities. Superstitious and hypocritical, cruel and inhuman, untrustworthy in word and capable of the lowest in deed, this moral monster, because he donned a Christian mantle for self-interest, is praised as a hero, a model prince. And it is such an unprincipled man who can be declared the founder of the Christian church, because he stamped the imprint of his ignorant mind, under the guidance of the priests, on the Nicene Creed, which provides the strongest proof of the perversion of reason and the absurdity of faith. Spiritual slavery alongside social slavery was the condition through which such a character could reign supreme as a tyrant.

1) While Constantine invoked his cross in the air, his colleague Licinius was even more fortunate, for when he once fought against the pagan Emperor Maximian, an angel appeared to him and taught him a whole prayer. Licinius had it written down, recited it three times to his army, and then achieved a complete victory. Had Licinius later defeated Constantine instead of the other way around, the angel's story would have been told.

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