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## **Saints Emperor Constantine and Empress Helena – Apostles of Christianity. The Edict of Milan (313 A.D.)**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is intended to be a presentation of the circumstances under which Constantine the Great came to be the ruler of the Roman Empire, and of the major reforms he initiated during his reign in favor of the Christian Church, along with his mother Helena. The first part of the paper outlines the political and religious context in the Roman Empire at the end of the third century and the beginning of the fourth one. The next section is dedicated to the conversion of Constantine and the Edict of Milan, which marked his option for Christianity. The last part of the study depicts the main actions Constantine took for the benefit of the Church and the Roman society: the Council of Nicaea, facilities given to the Church, improvement of the family legislation, establishment of the empire at Byzantium, humanitarian actions, support for the holy places.

### **Keywords**

Saints Constantine and Helena, Christian Church, the Edict of Milan

Before the accession of Emperor Constantine the Great to the throne, the situation of the Christians from the Empire had been precarious as Christianity was considered *religio illicita*. The persecutions against the

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Christians had begun in the year 64 A.D., initiated by Emperor Nero, and continued until the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, when Diocletian unleashed the most ruthless persecution against Christianity under the slogan: *Nomen christianorum delete* (*The names of the Christians shall be erased*). In the years 303-304, four persecution edicts are issued and as a result, numerous Christians from Asia Minor, the Middle East, Italy, the area to the south of the Danube, Scythia Minor and northern Africa are executed.<sup>1</sup> On 1 May 305, the two Augustus, Diocletian and Maximian, stepped down and in their place came Galerius for the East and Constantius Chlorus for the West; they, in turn, appointed two new Caesars, according to the system of the Tetrarchy that had been instituted by Diocletian. In the East, Galerius appointed his nephew Maximinus Daia, and in the West, Constantius Chlorus appointed Flavius Severus. When Constantius Chlorus died in 306, Constantine, Constantius' son, was proclaimed emperor by the army. Diocletian's Tetrarchic system disappears after 308, and in the year 310, there are five Augustus at the helm of the Roman Empire.<sup>2</sup> Throughout this period, the situation of the Christians does not change at all and their persecution continues. In 311, shortly before dying, Galerius issues an edict of toleration for Christians<sup>3</sup> that is cosigned by Licinius, appointed Augustus in the place of Flavius Severus, and by Constantine, who has been Augustus since 308. After Galerius' death, Maximinus Daia cancels the edict in the East and resumes the persecution against the Christians. The Battle of the Milvian Bridge of 312, where Constantine defeats Maxentius and claims emperorship over all the western provinces, is decisive for the subsequent development of the Christian Church.

Constantine's conversion to Christianity was decisive as until then, the Christians had been a minority in the Empire. The majority of the senatorial aristocracy was pagan, perhaps with the exception of that in Africa and Egypt.<sup>4</sup> As a result of Constantine's conversion, Christianity acquired new followers and spread rapidly, and, at the same time, led to a new relationship between the Church and the State. Lactantius and Eusebius

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<sup>1</sup> Vasile Muntean, *Istoria creștină generală*, vol. I, Editura IBMBOR, București, 2008, p. 88-89.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90-91.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Emanoil Băbuș, *Bizanțul, istorie și spiritualitate*, Editura Sophia, București, 2003, p. 28.

of Caesarea differ in their accounts of the event that occurred before the decisive Battle of the Milvian Bridge, and which led to Constantine's conversion; this disagreement has caused controversy about the authenticity of the accounts, particularly about the authenticity of the account given in Eusebius' *Life of Constantine*. Lactantius says that,

“during his sleep, Constantine was advised to mark the shield with God's heavenly sign of the cross before going into battle. He does as ordered and writes on the shields the name of Christ as an X crossed by the letter I curved towards the end. Armed with this symbol, the troops take their iron swords.”<sup>5</sup> Eusebius says that, “around noon, when the day was beginning to shorten, Constantine said that he had seen with his own eyes, above the sun in the sky, the sign of a cross made of light, indicating victory, and that together with the cross, he could see some writing saying: «Thou shalt be victorious for it!»;... And while he was sleeping, the Christ of God appeared with the sign that he had seen in the sky, and ordered him to make the sign that he had seen in the sky so that he can be under its protection in the coming battles with the enemy.”<sup>6</sup>

Some historians believe that the text referring to Constantine's vision was included in Eusebius' work later on, but we support the opinion of the historian Emilian Popescu, who claims that, although the account of the vision of the sign of the cross might have been written after the death of the emperor and might have suffered some modifications, taking on an aura of legend, the event itself was real and we cannot doubt it. Constantine was convinced that he had seen the sign of the cross in the sky and that this was what helped him in his battle with Maxentius.<sup>7</sup> Eusebius supports his account by claiming that “as long as the emperor, who had brought us the victory, confessed these things to us, I wonder who could still doubt the accuracy of the account, especially considering the fact that the future would bring the testimony to its truth?”<sup>8</sup> And indeed, the events following the Battle of the Milvian Bridge constitute proof of the authenticity of

<sup>5</sup> Lactanțiu, *op. cit.*, XLIV, 5, p. 209.

<sup>6</sup> Eusebiu de Cezareea, *Viața împăratului Constantin și alte scrieri*, I, 28-29, în colecția PSB nr. 8, Editura Basilica a Patriarhiei Române, București, 2012, p. 102-103.

<sup>7</sup> Emilian Popescu, *Studiu introductiv la Eusebiu de Cezareea*, *op. cit.*, p. 37-41.

<sup>8</sup> Eusebiu de Cezareea, *op. cit.*, I, 28, p. 102.

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Constantine's vision. According to the Panegyric of Trier of 313, after his triumphal entry into Rome, Constantine refused to walk up to the Capitoline and did not carry out the customary sacrifices to Jupiter. Moreover, the oldest Constantinian coins bearing the Christic monogram appeared between 312 and 313, immediately after the Battle of the Milvian Bridge.<sup>9</sup> In fact, Constantine's whole attitude towards Christianity changes after the year 312, and the most eloquent proof is the Edict of toleration of Mediolanum issued in 313, by which the two emperors, Constantine and Licinius, grant all the religions from the Empire, including the Christian religion, the freedom of worship; what is more, the edict stipulates that the places of worship and the properties that had been confiscated from the Christian Church had to be returned to it.<sup>10</sup> From now on, from a tolerated religion, Christianity will gradually become a privileged religion.

The text of this edict is the one left by Galerius before his death in Nicomedia on 30 April 311 and that had been signed by Constantine and Licinius, in which all persecution was stopped and the Christian Church was granted the freedom to practice their religion. Although the edict is signed by both emperors, the initiative must have belonged to Constantine exclusively. Even before February 313, Constantine had sent two letters to Anullinus, proconsul of Africa, in which he gave orders to return the Church's confiscated property and exempt the clergy from taxes. Another letter sent by Constantine to Cecilianus, the Bishop of Carthage, in the same period, announced the bishop that a hefty sum of money was being prepared for the payment of the Christian clergy.<sup>11</sup>

In the following years, Constantine took a series of measures and issued laws that favored the Christian Church and gradually led to its incorporation into the state organization: a law issued in 313 allowed slaves to be freed in the church, in the presence of the bishop; another law, issued in 321, allowed everyone who wanted to do so, to make testamentary donations to the Church; another law from the same year stipulates that "the day devoted to prayer shall be the most important and the first day as long as it was in fact a day devoted to God and bearing salvation;"<sup>12</sup> in 315, on

<sup>9</sup> Ion Barnea, Octavian Iliescu, *Constantin cel Mare*, Editura Științifică și Pedagogică, București, 1982, p. 36.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38-39.

<sup>12</sup> Eusebiu, *op. cit.*, IV, 18, p. 220.

the occasion of celebrating ten years of reign, Constantine renounced the pagan rites, which caused stupefaction in the Senate; from 317 onwards, Christians are also accepted in high positions; soon afterwards, with the exception of the God Sun, all the faces of the gods on coins are replaced with neutral inscriptions, but also with Christian signs. In 322, the face of the God Sun disappeared from the coins, and some religious cults that were deemed dangerous to the state were banned.<sup>13</sup>

After Licinius' defeat in 324, as the sole emperor of the Empire, Constantine extended to the East the laws that were favorable to Christianity and which had been enforced in the West of the Empire. In the East, Licinius had not observed the edict of toleration of Milan and had maintained the persecution of the Christians during the period between 320-324, when the Forty Martyrs froze to death in Lake Sevestia, and many other Christians were killed.<sup>14</sup> Constantine entrusted to the Christians the high positions from the eastern provinces as well as the position of *praefectus Urbi* from Rome; he granted support to the Christian communities to build and rebuild their places of worship; the bishops, who were considered leading personalities, became some sort of imperial advisers, such as Hosius of Cordoba.<sup>15</sup>

The emperor is increasingly involved in the affairs of the Church, aspiring to the same sole rule that he had pursued in the political field. The special care that Constantine manifested for the Christians, "as if he were a bishop of everybody, enthroned by God Himself,"<sup>16</sup> striving to contribute to unity, was rooted not only in a deep religious feeling but also in the awareness of practical, political necessities as he was convinced that the unity of faith had to be mirrored in the unity of the Empire. Throughout his entire reign, Constantine the Great aimed at maintaining the internal order and unity of the Empire. Seeing himself as the servant of God, answerable to Him for the good order in the Church, he never hesitated to intervene in its affairs in a decisive manner, as was the case when he summoned the First Ecumenical Synod of Nicaea. He set the precedent that only the

<sup>13</sup> Ion Barnea, Octavian Iliescu, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

<sup>14</sup> Ion Rămureanu, Milan Şesan, Teodor Bodogae, *Istoria Bisericească Universală*, vol. I, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, Bucureşti, 1975, p. 96.

<sup>15</sup> Ion Barnea, Octavian Iliescu, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

<sup>16</sup> Eusebiu de Cezareea, *op. cit.*, I, 44, p. 111.

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emperor could summon an Ecumenical Synod, and the Church accepted his authority.<sup>17</sup>

In 325, he summoned all the Christian bishops in a synod for the first time, thus opening the way to ecumenical synods. Known in history as the First Ecumenical Synod, it gathered about 318 bishops, who convened in Nicaea on 20 May 325. The synod was presided over by the Emperor himself, who also delivered the opening speech. As it is known, the reason for summoning the synod was the heresy of Arius of Alexandria, who did not accept Christ's divinity, maintaining that the Son was a creature made by God and was not consubstantial with God.<sup>18</sup> Condemning Arius, the bishops attending the Synod established the dogma about the divinity of the Son, in the Nicene Faith Symbol (the Nicene Creed), which establishes that Jesus is "true God from true God, begotten not made, of the substance of the Father maker of all things." The decisions taken by the Synod of Nicaea were enforced as laws, and Constantine himself asked the Christians to follow these decisions, believing that only in this way could the unity of faith be maintained.<sup>19</sup>

During the reign of Emperor Constantine, the number of churches increases, there is an intense theological activity, the Christians are favored to take positions in the administration and the Christian communities are encouraged. For instance, Maiuma, the Christian port of Gaza, obtains the rank of city, and Orikistos, a village in Phrygia, is granted the rank of *civitas* because all of its inhabitants are followers of the holiest religion.<sup>20</sup>

During the reign of Constantine the Great, the laws were heavily influenced by Christianity, protecting the weak against the powerful, the widows and the orphans, the Emperor actually taking measures meant to improve their precarious and unfair situation: applying the same system of taxation in eparchies as in the capital city; the obligation to work, by organizing professional corporations; bread distributions to the poor; setting fixed prices;<sup>21</sup> in 312, Sunday became an official holiday, when no administrative act was to be performed, except from freeing slaves, to the

<sup>17</sup> Emanoil Băbuș, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

<sup>18</sup> V. Muntean, *op. cit.*, I, p. 166.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168-169; Ștefan Fetyko, *În jurul Sinodului I Ecumenic*, în „Altarul Banatului”, nr. 9-10/1990, p. 28-35.

<sup>20</sup> Emanoil Băbuș, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>21</sup> G. I. Soare, *Biserica și asistența socială*, Tipografia cărților bisericești, București, 1948, p. 40-41.

already-existing forms of freeing the slaves Constantine adding the form of obtaining freedom in the church.<sup>22</sup> The emperor's moral concerns and the humanitarian character of the laws of his time can also be seen in: the laws banning crucifixion and the mutilation of the face; the law given in 320, according to which the prisoners had the right to see the sun every day; the 326 law against adultery; in the decree of 11 May 319, the pre-meditated killing of the slaves by their masters is qualified as murder; other laws harshly punished those who would steal other people's property, kidnapers, etc. Constantine the Great issued laws that plead for maintaining the integrity of the family as well as laws that protect the family members against abuse such as the decree of 325, which forbids the splitting of the slave's family in case he/she has a different master; in order to limit the selling of children, he decided that the parents who could not afford to maintain their children should receive subventions from the state; he took measures against fathers' abuse of power; a law given in 331 authorized a wife to ask for the divorce if the husband was a proven murderer or desecrator of a grave, and a husband if the wife had committed adultery or was accused of poisoning or proxenetism.<sup>23</sup>

Just like the emperor, his mother Helena helped the Christian communities, gave important financial support to the poor and the soldiers, founded asylums for the poor, houses for foreigners, asylums for the old and provided what was necessary for the good running of these establishments. Saint Helena considered that philanthropy was as necessary as breathing is for the human body.<sup>24</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea tells us that "the Empress Helena would give away gifts generously both to the people in cities and to anyone who came to her to ask for help... But she showed her generosity mostly to the poor and the helpless... in God's church."<sup>25</sup> During her trip to the Holy Places, Saint Helena found the Cross on which Jesus Christ the Savior had been crucified, buried with the other two crosses on which the thieves had been crucified. According to tradition, in order to find out which cross was the true one, the one on which the Savior had been crucified, Saint Helena had the body of a sick young man touch the

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<sup>22</sup> Ion Barnea, Octavian Iliescu, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65-66.

<sup>24</sup> Sorin Cosma, *Împărații Constantin și Elena: „Sfinți și întocmai cu Apostolii”*, în „Foaia Diecezană”, nr. 1/2013, p. 8-9.

<sup>25</sup> Eusebiu al Cezareei, *op. cit.*, III, 48, p. 190.

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crosses and the cross that made him recover from his illness was declared to be the Cross of Jesus. Some of the nails from the Cross were melted and the material thus obtained was used to make an iron helmet for the emperor, and for the bridle of his horse.<sup>26</sup> Saint Helena was an example of Christian love, as she dedicated her life to helping her people and to establishing churches.

One of the decisions of paramount importance for the Greek-Roman and European world made by Constantine the Great was to relocate the capital of the Empire from Rome to Byzantium, thus laying the foundations of the Byzantine Empire and ensuring the survival of the Greek-Latin civilization. Constantine realized that Rome was no longer adequate as a permanent residence for the Roman emperor and, less than two months after defeating Licinius, he founded the new city that would bear his name. The inauguration took place on 11 May 330, but the construction works lasted until the summer of 336.<sup>27</sup>

The choice of the new capital city of the empire had both economic, military and political as well as religious reasons. From here, it was easier to keep an eye on the most threatened border of the Lower Danube and on the Persian enemy; the economic power of the East was much bigger than that of the West;<sup>28</sup> the trade between the cities from around the Mediterranean Sea and Greece could only take this route, and no ship could sail through without permission from the inhabitants of Byzantium. Moving the capital, Constantine also wanted to establish a “New Rome”, far from the Roman aristocracy that had remained faithful to the old religion and traditions, but wished to grant it the same rights and privileges as those enjoyed by the city on the banks of the River Tiber, such as *jus Italicum*, according to which its territory was exempt from taxes. Constantine gave the new capital a strong Christian character by dedicating it to the Holy Virgin, encouraging the building of churches and commissioning churches himself, for instance Saint Sophia and Saint Irene.<sup>29</sup> On the occasion of its dedication, a service was held in the Saint Irene Church, while the pagan population prayed for their prosperity in authorized temples.

<sup>26</sup> Emanoil Băbuș, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

<sup>27</sup> Ion Barnea, Octavian Iliescu, *op. cit.*, p. 51-52.

<sup>28</sup> Nicolae Bănescu, *Întemeierea Constantinopolului*, în „Mitropolia Olteniei”, nr. 7-8/1963, p. 506-510.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

Christian art and architecture made great strides after the Edict of Milan as Constantine and his mother Helena spent large sums of money for the building and decoration of many Christian churches. Now is the time when great basilicas are built in the most important places linked to the beginnings of Christianity. Special attention is given to the places of theophany on the territory of Palestine, which become centers of pilgrimage. Thus, important basilicas were built such as the Basilica of the “Nativity of Bethlehem”, above the cave where the Savior was born, the Basilica of the “Resurrection” (Holy Sepulcher), above the tomb of Christ, built from carved stone, having five naves, an atrium with five colonnades to the east, and another atrium to the west connecting it to the rotunda that closed the cave where the tomb of the Savior was, the Basilica of the “Ascension” on the Mount of Olives, the basilica from the Oak of Mamre, the basilica by the Lake of Gennesaret, where Christ performed the miracle of multiplying the five loaves of bread and the two fish.<sup>30</sup>

Constantine commissioned the first basilica-style church in Lateran in 313, after the imperial palace from here became the episcopal residence of the city of Rome. The Lateran Basilica had a majestic transept and baptistery. Much larger, the St. Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican City is considered to be the first *martyrium* basilica in the true sense of the word. It has a transept, five naves, an apse to the west and an atrium with four colonnades to the east. The *martyrium* basilicas built above the graves of Saints Lawrence and Agnese are much smaller.<sup>31</sup> Constantine commissioned three impressive churches in the new capital city of the Empire: the Saint Sophia Basilica, the Saint Irene Basilica and the Basilica of the Holy Apostles, which would be dedicated by his son Constantius. Although the churches that are built now draw their inspiration from the Greek-Roman architecture, they are original creations that will become sources of inspiration for the religious architecture of the Byzantine Empire in the centuries to come. From the combination of the longitudinal-type buildings and the central-type ones, from the fusion between the East and the West, the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries will see the emergence of the Byzantine-style domed churches.<sup>32</sup> As for the paintings, instead of the symbolic representations that were painted

<sup>30</sup> Ion Barnea, Octavian Iliescu, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>32</sup> Ene Braniște, *Liturgica generală cu noțiuni de artă bisericească*, Editura IBMBOR, București, 1985, p. 361-396.

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during the times of persecution, now they illustrate representations of a historical and narrative character, showing themes linked to the beginnings of Christianity. Gradually

“the art stopped being the object of purely sensory perception, which had been characteristic of the ancient world, and turned into a strong instrument of religious influence, meant to drive the believer away from the material world and introduce him into the transcendental one.”<sup>33</sup>

For their great deeds, because they defended the rightful faith, the Orthodox Church honors the memory of the Emperor Constantine the Great and that of his mother Helena, considering them saints and just like the apostles. Attempting to summarize Constantine the Great’s achievements in terms of Christianity, the Byzantologist Paul Lemerle reaches this conclusion:

“the Christians were not persecuted, but treated favorably; their religion was no longer forbidden, but legal; of law, Christianity was not placed higher than paganism, but of fact, it was in the position of defeating it definitively; it was not a state religion, but a privileged religion; and, for the first time in history, an emperor was baptized, and the state took an interest in the internal affairs of the Church. All these are, no doubt, sufficient arguments to justify the eminent place given to Constantine by the Christian tradition.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Victor Lazarev, *Istoria picturii bizantine*, vol. I, Editura Meridiane, București, 1980, p. 45-46.

<sup>34</sup> Paul Lemerle, *Istoria Bizanțului*, Editura Teora, București, 1998, p. 26.