PART II

THE IMPERIAL CHURCH

Chronology

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

*Bishops whom the Roman church does not recognize are in italics
**Dagger (†) indicates that year given is year of death.

13
Constantine

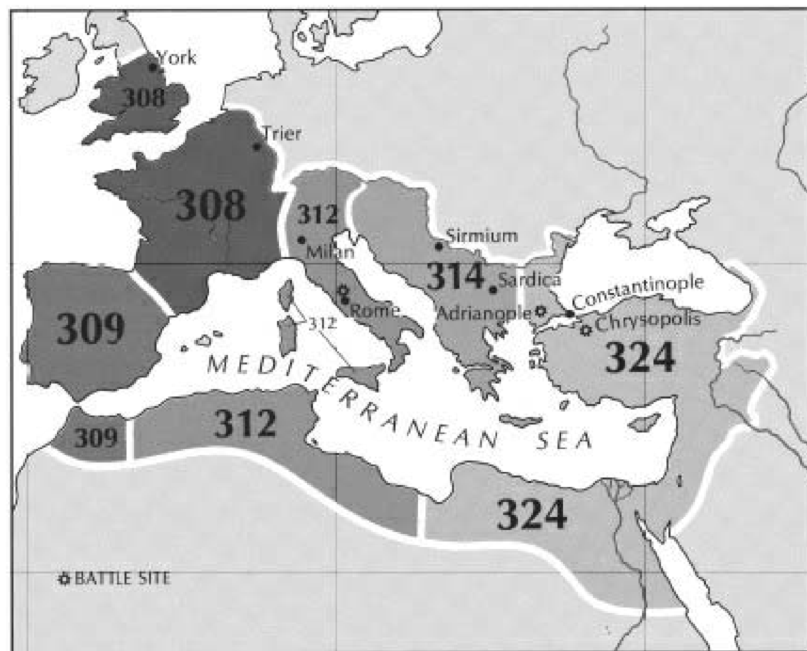
> The eternal, holy and unfathomable goodness of God does not allow us to wander in darkness, but shows us the way of salvation. . . . This I have seen in others as well as in myself.
>
> CONSTANTINE

We left Constantine at the moment when, after defeating Maxentius at the Milvian bridge, he joined Licinius in ordering the end of persecution. Although we have already indicated that eventually he became sole ruler of the Roman Empire, it now remains to outline the process by which he achieved that goal. The question of the nature and sincerity of his conversion must also be discussed. But what is of paramount importance for the story of Christianity is not so much how sincere Constantine was, or how he understood the Christian faith, as the impact of his conversion and his rule both during his lifetime and thereafter. That impact was such that it has even been suggested that throughout most of its history the church has lived in its *Constantinian era*, and that even now, in the twenty-first century, we are going through crises connected with the end of that long era. Whether or not this is true is a question to be discussed when our narrative comes to the present day. In any case, Constantine's religious policies had such enormous effect on the course of Christianity that all of Part II may be seen as a series of reactions and adjustments in response to those policies.

FROM ROME TO CONSTANTINOPLE

Long before the battle at the Milvian bridge, Constantine had been preparing to extend the territories under his rule. To that end, he took great care to develop a strong base of operations in Gaul and Great Britain. He spent

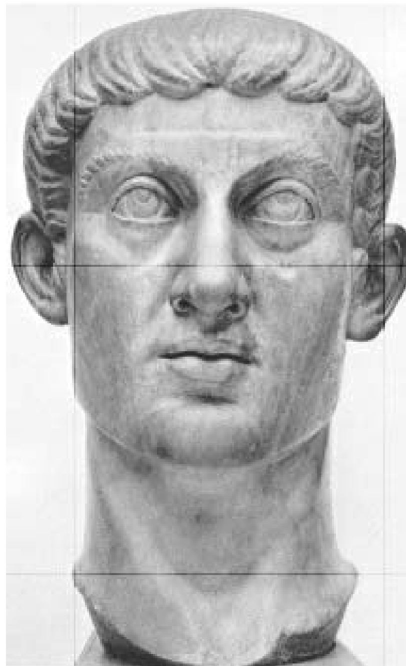
over five years strengthening the borders along the Rhine, where the barbarians were a constant threat, and courting the favor of his subjects by his just and wise government. This did not make him an ideal ruler. His love of luxury and pomp was such that he built a grandiose and ornate palace in his capital city—Trier—while neglecting public works to such an extent that the drainage system of the nearby fields failed, and the vineyards that were the backbone of the local economy were flooded. Yet, he seems to have had that rare gift of rulers who know just how far they can tax their subjects without losing their loyalty. By securing the borders against barbarian incursions, Constantine won the gratitude of many in Gaul. Frequent and extravagant shows in the circus gained the support of those who preferred violence and blood—the barbarian captives thus sacrificed were so many that a chronicler of the times affirms that the shows lost some of their interest because the beasts grew tired of killing.



Constantine's path to absolute power.

An astute statesman, Constantine challenged his rivals one at a time, always protecting his flanks before making his next move. Thus, although his campaign against Maxentius seemed sudden, he had been preparing for it, both militarily and politically, for many years. His military preparations were such that in his campaign against Maxentius he committed only one-fourth of his resources, thus making sure that during his absence there would

not be a major barbarian invasion, or a revolt in his own territories. In the field of diplomacy, he had to make sure that Licinius, who was Maxentius's neighbor to the east, would not take advantage of Constantine's campaign to invade and lay claim to some of Maxentius's territories. In order to preclude that possibility, Constantine offered his half-sister Constance in marriage to Licinius, and he may also have made a secret agreement with his future brother-in-law. This would seem to cover his flank. But even then, he waited until Licinius was involved in a conflict with Maximinus Daia before launching his own invasion of Italy.



Constantine would leave his mark on the Christian church for more than a thousand years.

The victory at the Milvian bridge gave Constantine control of the Western half of the empire, while the East was still partitioned, split between Licinius and Maximinus Daia. His meeting with Licinius in Milan seemed to strengthen their alliance, and forced Licinius to direct his efforts against their common rival, Maximinus Daia. Licinius moved rapidly. Maximinus was still near Byzantium—later Constantinople, and now Istanbul—when his enemy appeared before him with a smaller army and defeated him. Maximinus was forced to flee, and died shortly thereafter.

The empire was then divided between Licinius, who ruled over the entire area east of Italy, including Egypt, and Constantine, who controlled

Italy as well as Western Europe and the western portion of North Africa. Since the two emperors were related by marriage, there was hope that the civil wars had come to an end. But the truth was that both Licinius and Constantine sought to rule the whole empire, which, in spite of its vastness, was too small for the two of them. For a while, each of the two rivals devoted himself to consolidate his power and to prepare for the inevitable conflict.

Licinius was Constantine's brother-in-law, and his main rival.

Finally, hostilities broke out. A conspiracy to murder Constantine was discovered, and the ensuing investigation implicated a relative of Licinius who had fled to his kinsman's territories. Licinius refused to send his relative to Constantine to be executed, and eventually declared war on Constantine. Although Christian historians have usually laid all the blame for this conflict on Licinius, the truth is that Constantine wished to go to war with his brother-in-law, but was able to make his rival appear as the aggressor. Finding himself militarily outmaneuvered by Constantine, Licinius had to sue for peace. Once again, Constantine showed that he was an able statesman and a patient man, and was content with taking most of Licinius's European territories.

A period of peace followed. Once again, Constantine used the time to consolidate his power in the newly conquered territories. Instead of residing in the West, he established his headquarters first in Sirmium and later in Sardica (now Sofia). Both cities were located in recently conquered territories, and thus Constantine was able to keep an eye on Licinius and to strengthen his rule over the area.

The truce lasted until 322, although there was an ever-increasing tension between the two emperors. The main reason for conflict was still the

ambition of both men, which found expression in the question of what titles and honors were to be given to their sons. But by the time war finally broke out, the question of religious policy had also become a bone of contention.

Licinius's religious policy needs to be clarified, for after Constantine's victory some Christian writers, in order to justify his actions against Licinius, made the latter appear in a bad light. For a number of years after the Edict of Milan, Licinius took no measures against Christians. Actually, a contemporary Christian writer, in telling the story of Licinius's victory over Maximinus Daia, makes it sound very similar to Constantine's victory over Maxentius—including a vision. But Christianity in Licinius's territories was divided over a number of issues, and such divisions led to public disorders. When Licinius used his imperial powers to assure peace, there were groups of Christians that considered themselves wronged, and who began thinking of Constantine as the defender of the true faith, and as "the emperor whom God loved." Licinius was not a Christian, but there are indications that he feared the power of the Christian God; and therefore, when he learned that his subjects were praying for his rival, he felt that this was high treason. It was then that he took measures against some Christians, and this in turn gave Constantine the opportunity to present himself as the defender of Christianity against Licinius the persecutor.

In 322, Constantine invaded Licinius's territories, using the pretext that he was in pursuit of a band of barbarians who had crossed the Danube. Licinius interpreted this, rightly or wrongly, as an intentional provocation, and prepared for war by gathering his troops at Adrianople, where he awaited Constantine's somewhat smaller armies.

Contemporary chroniclers affirm that Licinius feared the magical power of Constantine's *labarum,* and that he ordered his soldiers to avoid looking at the Christian emblem, and not to direct a frontal attack against it. If this is true, it must have demoralized his troops. In any case, after a long and bloody battle, Constantine's smaller army won the day and Licinius fled to Byzantium. His wife Constance—probably accompanied by Bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia, who will have an important role to play as our story unfolds—went in his name to her brother Constantine, who promised to spare Licinius's life in exchange for his abdication. Shortly thereafter, Licinius was murdered. Constantine was now sole master of the empire.

Constantine would reign for the next thirteen years, until his death in 337. Compared with the previous civil wars, this was a period of rebuilding and prosperity. But there was always political uneasiness, and quite a few

people were condemned to death for real or supposed conspiracies against the emperor—among them his oldest son, Crispus, who had commanded his father's fleet in the war against Licinius, and whom Constantine ordered executed.

Constantine had not sought absolute power for the mere pleasure of it. He also dreamed, like Decius and Diocletian before him, of restoring the ancient glory of the empire. The main difference was that, whereas Decius and Diocletian had sought that end through a restoration of paganism, Constantine believed that it could best be achieved on the basis of Christianity. Some of the staunchest opponents of this policy were in Rome, particularly in its Senate, where the members of the old aristocracy bemoaned the eclipse of their ancient gods and privileges. Several years before his final struggle with Licinius, Constantine had clashed with the interests of the Roman Senate. Now, as absolute master of the empire, he set out on a bold course: he would build a "New Rome," an impregnable and monumental city, which would be called Constantinople—that is, "City of Constantine."

It may well have been during his campaign against Licinius that Constantine became aware of the strategic value of Byzantium. That city was at the very edge of Europe, where it almost touched Asia Minor. Thus, it could serve as a bridge between the European and the Asian portions of the empire. Furthermore, if properly fortified, Byzantium would control the Bosporus, through which all shipping had to pass in its way from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea. A peace treaty made with Persia several decades earlier was about to expire, and the emperor felt the need to establish his headquarters near the Eastern border. But at the same time the Germanic tribes on the Rhine were always a threat, and therefore it would not be wise for the emperor to settle too far from the West. For all these reasons, Byzantium seemed the ideal location for the new capital. Constantine's choice—for which he took no credit, claiming that he was following instructions from God—proved to be most wise, for the city that he founded would play a strategic role for centuries to come.

But ancient Byzantium was too small for the grandiose dreams of the great emperor. Its walls, built during the reign of Septimius Severus, were scarcely two miles long. Aping the ancient legend of Romulus and Remus and the founding of Rome, Constantine went to the fields far beyond the ancient walls, and with his lance marked the route that the new walls should follow. This was done amid great ceremonies in which both Christians and

pagan priests took part. When those who followed the emperor, seeing him walk far into the countryside, asked him how far he intended to go, he is said to have answered: “As far as the One who walks ahead of me.” Naturally, Christians in his entourage would have understood these words to refer to their God, whereas pagans would have taken them to mean one of their gods, or perhaps the Unconquered Sun. By the end of the ceremonies, Constantine had set aside a vast area, capable of holding a teeming multitude.

Construction began immediately. Since the materials and skilled artisans available were not sufficient to meet Constantine’s timetable, things such as statues, columns, and so on were brought from various cities. Constantine’s agents scoured the empire in search of anything that could embellish the new capital. Years later, Jerome would say that Constantinople was dressed in the nakedness of the rest of the empire. A number of statues of pagan gods were taken from their ancient temples and placed in such public places as the hippodrome, the public baths, or the squares. Thus, used as mere ornaments, the ancient gods seemed to have lost their old power.

Perhaps the most famous statue thus taken to Constantinople was the sculpture of Apollo said to be the work of Phidias, one of the greatest sculptors of all time. This was placed in the middle of the city, atop a huge stone column brought from Egypt, and which was reputed to be the largest such monolith in the world. To make it even taller, the column was placed on a marble pedestal that was over twenty feet high. The entire monument measured approximately 125 feet from top to bottom. But the statue itself no longer represented Apollo, for a new head, that of Constantine, had been placed upon it.

Other great public works were the basilica of Saint Irene—that is, holy peace—the hippodrome, and the public baths. Also, a great palace was built for the emperor, and the few noble families agreed to move from Old Rome were given replicas of their ancestral mansions.

All this, however, did not suffice to populate the new city. To that end, Constantine granted all sorts of privileges to those who came to live there, such as exemption from taxes and from military service. Soon it became customary to give free oil, wheat, and wine to the citizens of Constantinople. The result was that the city grew at such an incredible rate that a century later, under Theodosius II, it was necessary to build new walls, for the population had outgrown the ones that in Constantine’s time had seemed excessively ambitious.

As will be seen in future chapters of this history, Constantine's decision to found a new capital had enormous consequences, for shortly thereafter the Western portion of the empire—old Rome included—was overrun by the barbarians, and Constantinople became the center that for a thousand years kept alive the political and cultural inheritance of the old empire. Since its capital was in ancient Byzantium, this Eastern Roman Empire is also called the Byzantine Empire.

FROM THE UNCONQUERED SUN TO JESUS CHRIST

The nature of Constantine's conversion has been the subject of many debates. Shortly after the events told in this chapter, there were Christian authors—one of whom we shall meet in the next chapter—who sought to show that the emperor's conversion was the goal toward which the history of the church and of the empire had always been moving. Others have claimed that Constantine was simply a shrewd politician who became aware of the advantages to be drawn from a "conversion."

Both interpretations are exaggerated. It suffices to read the documents of the time to become aware that Constantine's conversion was very different from that of other Christians. At that time, people who were converted were put through a long process of discipline and instruction, in order to make certain that they understood and lived their new faith, and then they were baptized. Their bishop became their guide and shepherd as they sought to discover the implications of their faith in various situations in life.

Constantine's case was very different. Even after the battle of the Milvian bridge, and throughout his entire life, he never placed himself under the direction of Christian teachers or bishops. Christians such as Lactantius—tutor to his son Crispus—formed part of his entourage. Hosius, bishop of Cordoba, became for a time his liaison with other ecclesiastical leaders. But Constantine reserved the right to determine his own religious practices, and even to intervene in the life of the church, for he considered himself "bishop of bishops." Repeatedly, even after his conversion, he took part in pagan rites in which no Christian would participate, and the bishops raised no voice of condemnation.

The reason for this was not only that the emperor was both powerful and irascible, but also that, in spite of his policies favoring Christianity, and of his repeated confession of the power of Christ, he was not technically a Christian, for he had not been baptized. In fact, it was only on his deathbed that he was baptized. Therefore, any policy or edict favoring Christianity

was received by the church as the action of one who was friendly or even inclined to become a Christian, but who had not taken the decisive step. And any religious or moral deviations on Constantine's part were seen in the same light, as the unfortunate actions of one who, while inclined to become a Christian, was not one of the faithful. Such a person could receive the advice and even the support of the church, but not its direction. This ambiguous situation continued until Constantine's final hour.

On the other hand, there are several reasons why Constantine should not be seen as a mere opportunist who declared himself in favor of Christianity in order to court the support of Christians. First of all, such a view is rather anachronistic, for it tends to see Constantine as a forerunner of modern politicians. At that time, even the most incredulous did not approach religious matters with such a calculating attitude. Secondly, if Constantine had been such an opportunist, he chose a poor time to seek the support of Christians. When he put the Chi-Rho on his *labarum,* he was preparing to go to battle for the city of Rome, center of pagan traditions, where his main supporters were the members of the old aristocracy who considered themselves oppressed by Maxentius. Christians were stronger, not in the West, where the battle was to be fought, but in the East, to which Constantine would lay claim only years later. Finally, it should be pointed out that whatever support Christians could give Constantine was of doubtful value. Given the ambivalence of the church toward military service, the number of Christian soldiers in the army, particularly in the West, was relatively small. Among the civilian population, most Christians belonged to the lower classes, and thus had scarce economic resources to put at the disposal of Constantine. After almost three centuries of tension with the empire, it was impossible to predict what would be the attitude of Christians before such an unexpected thing as a Christian emperor.

The truth is probably that Constantine was a sincere believer in the power of Christ. But this does not mean that he understood that power in the same way in which it had been experienced by those Christians who had died for it. 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. It was this God who gave him the victory at the Milvian bridge, as well as the many that followed. In a way, Constantine's understanding of Christianity was similar to Licinius's, when the latter

feared the supernatural power of his rival's *labarum.* The difference was simply that Constantine had laid claim to that power by serving the cause of Christians. This interpretation of Constantine's faith is supported by his own statements, which reveal a sincere man with a meager understanding of the Christian faith.

This did not prevent the emperor from serving other gods. His own father had been a devotee of the Unconquered Sun. While not denying the existence of other gods, the worship of the Unconquered Sun was addressed to the Supreme Being, whose symbol was the sun. During most of his political career, Constantine seems to have thought that the Unconquered Sun and the Christian God were compatible—perhaps two views of the same Supreme Deity—and that the other gods, although subordinate, were nevertheless real and relatively powerful. On occasion, he would consult the oracle of Apollo, accept the title of High Priest that had traditionally been the prerogative of emperors, and partake of all sorts of pagan ceremonies without thinking that he was thus betraying or abandoning the God who had given him victory and power.

Constantine was a shrewd politician. His power was such that he could favor Christians, build churches, and even have some images of gods moved to Constantinople to serve as ornaments in his dream city. But if he had attempted to suppress pagan worship, he would soon have had to face an irresistible opposition. The ancient gods were far from forgotten. Christianity had made very little progress among the old aristocracy and the rural masses. There were in the army many followers of Mithras and other gods. The Academy of Athens and the Museum of Alexandria, the two great centers of learning of the time, were devoted to the study of ancient pagan wisdom. An imperial decree could not undo all this—not yet, anyway. And in any case the emperor himself, who saw no contradiction between the Unconquered Sun and the Incarnate Son, was not inclined to issue such a decree.

Given these circumstances, Constantine's religious policy followed a slow but constant process. It is likely that this process responded both to the demands of political realities and to Constantine's own inner development, as he progressively left behind the ancient religion and gained a better understanding of the new. At first, he simply put an end to persecution and ordered that confiscated Christian property be returned. Shortly thereafter he gave new signs of favoring Christianity, such as donating to the church the Lateran palace in Rome, which had belonged to his wife, or putting the

imperial posts at the service of bishops traveling to attend the Synod of Arles in 314. At the same time, he sought to keep good relations with those who followed the ancient religions, and most especially with the Roman Senate. The official religion of the empire was paganism. As head of that empire Constantine took the title of Supreme Pontiff or High Priest, and performed the functions pertaining to that title. On coins minted as late as 320 one finds the names and symbols of the ancient gods, as well as the monogram for the name of Christ—the Chi-Rho that Constantine had used for the first time at the Milvian bridge.

The campaign against Licinius gave Constantine occasion to appear as the champion of Christianity. He was now moving into the territories where for quite a time the church had counted the greatest number of adherents. After defeating Licinius, Constantine appointed a number of Christians to high positions in government. Since his tensions with the Roman Senate were growing, and that body was promoting a resurgence of paganism, Constantine felt increasingly inclined to favor Christianity.

In the year 324 an imperial edict ordered all soldiers to worship the Supreme God on the first day of the week. This was the day on which Christians gathered to celebrate the Resurrection of their Lord. But it was also the day of the Unconquered Sun, and therefore pagans saw no reason to oppose such an edict. A year later, in 325, the great assembly of bishops that would later be known as the First Ecumenical Council gathered at Nicea.[24] That assembly was called by the emperor, who once again put the imperial posts at the disposal of the traveling bishops.

The founding of Constantinople was a further step in that process. The very act of creating a “New Rome” was an attempt to diminish the power of the ancient aristocratic families of Rome, who were mostly pagan. The raiding of pagan temples for statues and other objects with which to embellish the new capital was a blow to paganism, many of whose ancient shrines lost the gods that were objects of local devotion. Even Christian writers acknowledged that this was accomplished through an unwarranted use of force, and that people often complied for fear of retribution. At the same time, the building of new and sumptuous churches contrasted with the sacking of the old temples.

In spite of all this, almost to his dying day Constantine continued functioning as the High Priest of paganism. After his death, the three sons who succeeded him did not oppose the Senate’s move to have him declared a god. Thus, the ironic anomaly occurred, that Constantine, who had done so

much to the detriment of paganism, became one of the pagan gods—and to compound the irony, the Eastern church considers him a saint, thus resulting in a saint who is also a pagan god!

FROM PERSECUTION TO DOMINANCE

Although Constantine was certainly an important turning point in the life of the church—to the extent that one may properly speak of a "Constantinian era" stretching from his time until the early twentieth century—he did not make Christianity the official religion of the empire. Constantine himself remained a pagan priest, as befitted his role as emperor, and was not baptized until he was about to die. His sons Constantine II, Constantius, and Constans were baptized, and certainly several of their edicts favored Christianity. But their rule was marked by dissension as the church was bitterly divided over the issue of Arianism (a view of Christ and the Godhead that will be discussed in Chapter 17) and imperial religious policies focused on that dispute. In 356, Constantius, by then sole emperor, declared the worship of images to be a capital crime; but the law was generally ignored. Then Constantine's nephew Julian—who had been baptized—led a pagan reaction, and is therefore commonly known as "the Apostate." After Julian's reign, Jovian and Valentinian II continued the earlier policy of supporting Christianity—most often in its Arian version—while not taking stern measures against paganism. Christianity and paganism were generally on an equal footing before the state, both allowed and both supported by it. It was in the last years of the reign of Emperor Gratian (375–383), who had called on Theodosius (379–395) to share his rule, that decisive measures were taken to place paganism at a disadvantage. In 382, Gratian decreed an end to governmental financial support for paganism and its priests, and he also ordered that the altar to the goddess Victory be removed from the Senate-House. In 391, Theodosius outlawed pagan sacrifices and ordered the temples closed or devoted to public use. In 392, all pagan worship—private as well as public—was forbidden.

Yet the greatest threat to the ancient religion was the manner in which overzealous bishops and mobs took these decrees as license to use force against paganism. Even before the time of Constantine, some fanatical Christians used violence against pagan worship, as attested by the Council of Elvira in Spain in 305, whose sixtieth canon orders that "if any are killed as a result of having destroyed idols, they should not be counted among the martyrs." Now, as Christianity was favored by the empire, and paganism

lost its protection, the use of force against pagans—and Jews—was seldom punished. Distinguished and even saintly bishops such as Martin of Tours destroyed pagan temples and other places of worship. There is ample evidence of violence committed by Christians against pagans, and of pagans' resistance to the new order. In Alexandria, Bishop Theophilus—whom we shall encounter again as one of the most unscrupulous of John Chrysostom's enemies—claimed possession of all pagan temples, sacked them, and then paraded part of his loot. His pagan opponents gathered in the ancient temple to Serapis, where they held and crucified a number of Christians. Theophilus appealed to the authorities, who besieged and eventually took the temple. Theophilus then brought in the monks from the desert to demolish it. Similar incidents were repeated in Carthage, in Palestine, and elsewhere.

Perhaps the most telling sign of the change that was taking place is the very word "paganism." The ancient religion had no name, except those of the various gods. After the events of the fourth century, it was relegated to the most remote areas of the empire and, as we have seen, the word for *rustic*, ("*paganus")*, which some Christians had used pejoratively with regard to their opponents, came to refer to those who followed the ancient, now rural, religion.

THE IMPACT OF THE NEW ORDER

The most immediate consequence of Constantine's conversion was the cessation of persecution. Until then, even at times of relative peace, Christians had lived under the threat of persecution, and what was for many the hope of martyrdom. After Constantine's conversion, that threat and that hope dissipated. The few pagan emperors who reigned after him did not generally persecute Christians, but rather tried to restore paganism by other means. But the immediate impact of that conversion on the life of the church went far beyond the obvious cessation of persecution. In this regard, a series of imperial edicts granted the church and its leaders' privileges whose echoes may still be seen in some areas in the twenty-first century. One of this was tax exemption for church properties, as well as making it legal to bequeath property to the church. Over the long run, this would mean that the church would come to own vast lands and other riches. The bishops—at the time there were about eighteen hundred of them—as well as other clergy were also granted exemption from taxes, from military conscription, and from the days of labor that others were forced to devote to public

works. First on the occasion of the Synod of Arles in 314, then of the Council of Nicea in 325, and eventually as a matter of normal policy, bishops were granted free access to the imperial posts. Constantine also sought to legislate on matters of personal conduct—particularly sexual morality—in ways that seem to have been influenced by Christian teaching. But in this regard his efforts had as scant results as many other similar efforts throughout the history of the church. At the same time, the new privileges, prestige and power now granted to church leaders soon led to acts of arrogance and even to corruption. Historian Theodoret refers to a certain Lucius, who bought his position as bishop of Alexandria "as if it were a mere worldly dignity"—a practice that would later be called simony—and other ancient authors attest to similar practices elsewhere. As bishops came to have judicial powers, bribes were offered, and often accepted. While this was far from general practice, it bespoke of the new dangers now threatening the church—dangers it has often faced when it has been powerful and prestigious.

As for the laity, there is no doubt that the experience of conversion became less dramatic or fateful than it had been in earlier times. There is ample evidence of increasing syncretism and superstition. Archeologists have found proof of this in tombs in various areas of the empire, where people were buried with a combination of Christian and pagan symbols and religious artifacts. When people became ill, they often had recourse to ancient magical practice, much to the chagrin of many a Christian preacher. Gladiatorial combats persisted, and some Christians now attended—as they also attended plays that had earlier been forbidden to them.

The decree ordering the first day of the week to be devoted to worship—apparently both of Christ and of the Unconquered Sun—made it possible for Christians to gather more easily, no longer having to meet in the early hours of the morning, before work. This, and the influence of civil ceremonies and pomp, had an influence on Christian worship, which in the actual practice of religion was the point at which most rank and file Christians probably felt the impact of the new order.

Until Constantine's time, Christian worship had been relatively simple. At first, Christians gathered to worship in private homes. Then they began to gather in cemeteries, such as the Roman catacombs. By the third century there were structures set aside for worship such as the house in Dura-Europos mentioned in Chapter 11.

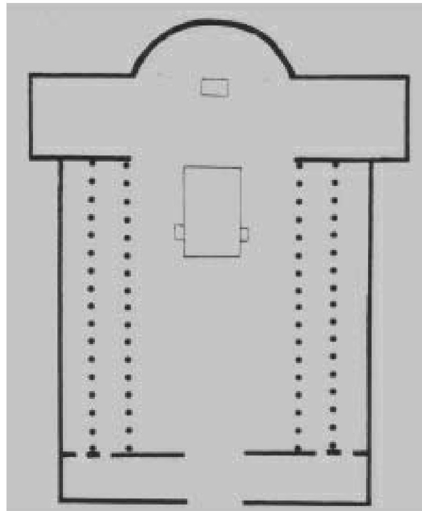
After Constantine's conversion, Christian worship began to be

influenced by imperial protocol. Incense, which was used as a sign of respect for the emperor, began appearing in Christian churches. Officiating ministers, who until then had worn everyday clothes, began dressing in more luxurious garments—and soon were called "priests," in imitation of their pagan counterparts, while the communion table became an "altar"—in opposition to the instructions found earlier in the *Didache*. Likewise, a number of gestures indicating respect, which were normally made before the emperor, now became part of Christian worship. An interesting example of this had to do with prayer on Sundays. At an earlier time, the practice was not to kneel for prayer on Sundays, for that is the day of our adoption, when we approach the throne of the Most High as children and heirs to the Great King. Now, after Constantine, one always knelt for prayer, as petitioners usually knelt before the emperor. The custom was also introduced of beginning services with a processional. Choirs were developed, partly in order to give body to that procession. Eventually, the congregation came to have a less active role in worship.

Already in the second century, it had become customary to commemorate the anniversary of a martyr's death by celebrating communion where the martyr had been buried. Now churches were built in many of those places. Eventually, some came to think that worship was particularly valid if it was celebrated in one of those holy places, where the relics of a martyr were present. As a consequence, some began to unearth the buried bodies of martyrs in order to place them—or part of them—under the altar of one of the many churches that were being built. Others began claiming revelations of martyrs who had not been known, or who had been almost forgotten. Some even said that they had received visions telling them where a particular martyr was buried—as in the case of Ambrose and the supposed remains of Saints Gervasius and Protasius. Eventually, the relics of saints and of New Testament times were said to have miraculous powers. Empress Helena, the mother of Constantine, gave special impetus to this entire development when, in a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, she claimed to have discovered the very cross of Christ. Soon this cross was said to have miraculous powers, and pieces of wood claiming to come from it were found all over the empire.

While these developments were taking place, many leaders of the church viewed them with disfavor, and tried to prevent superstitious extremes. Thus, a common theme of preaching was that it was not necessary to go to the Holy Land in order to be a good Christian, and that the respect due to the

martyrs should not be exaggerated. But such preaching was unequal to the task, for people were flocking into the church in such numbers that there was little time to prepare them for baptism, and even less to guide them in the Christian life once they had been baptized. In contrast to earlier times, when there was a far-reaching program of teaching and training for new converts, the church now found itself overwhelmed by the numbers of those requesting baptism, and unable to give them proper training and supervision. The long term of training and teaching before receiving baptism was dramatically shortened, and soon many went to the baptismal font with very little idea of its significance. Many of these new converts brought with them beliefs and customs that the earlier church would have considered unacceptable—to which numerous sermons attacking superstition among believers give ample witness.



Floor plan of a typical basilica.

The churches built in the time of Constantine and his successors contrasted with the simplicity of churches such as that of Dura-Europos. Constantine himself ordered that the Church of Saint Irene—Holy Peace—be built in Constantinople. Helena, his mother, built in the Holy Land The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and another one on the Mount of Olives. Similar churches were built in the major cities of the empire, sometimes by imperial command, and sometimes simply following the example of the new capital. On occasion, local residents were ordered to contribute to the building of churches with labor and materials. This policy continued under Constantine's successors, most of whom sought to perpetuate their memory

by building great churches. Although most of the churches built by Constantine and his first successors have been destroyed, there is enough evidence to offer a general idea of their basic plan—which in any case was copied in a number of subsequent churches that still stand.

Some of these churches had an altar in the center, and their floor plan was polygonal or almost round. But most of them followed the basic rectangular plan of the "basilica." This was an ancient word which referred to the great public—or sometimes private—buildings whose main part was a great room divided lengthwise into naves by two or more rows of columns. Since these structures provided the model for church buildings during the first centuries after Constantine's conversion, such churches came to be known as "basilicas."

In general, Christian basilicas had three main parts: the atrium, the naves, and the sanctuary. The atrium was the entryway, usually consisting of a rectangular area surrounded by walls. In the middle of the atrium was a fountain where the faithful could perform their ablutions—ritual washing—before entering the main part of the building. The side of the atrium abutting the rest of the basilica was called the narthex, and had one or more doors leading to the naves.

The naves were the most spacious section of the basilica. In the middle was the main nave, set aside from the lateral ones by rows of columns. The roof of the main nave was usually higher than the rest of the building, so that on the two rows of columns separating it from the other naves there were tall walls with windows that provided light. The lateral naves were lower and usually narrower than the main one. Since there were normally two or four rows of columns, some basilicas had a total of three naves, and others had five—although there were some basilicas with up to nine naves, very few had more than five.

Toward the end of the main nave, near the sanctuary, there was a section reserved for the choir, usually fenced in. On each of the two sides of this section there was a pulpit, which was used for the reading and exposition of scripture as well as for the main cantor during the singing of the Psalms.

The sanctuary was at the end of the nave, with the floor at a higher level. It ran on a direction perpendicular to the nave, and was somewhat longer than the rest of the basilica was wide, thus giving the entire floor plan the shape of a cross or T. In a place near the middle of the sanctuary was the altar, where the elements were placed for the celebration of communion.

The back wall of the sanctuary, directly behind the main nave, was

semicircular, thus forming the apse—a concave space behind the altar. Against the wall of the apse there were benches for the officiating ministers. If it was the main church of a bishop, amid these benches there was a chair for the bishop, the "cathedra"—which gave rise to the word "cathedral." On some occasions, the bishop would preach seated on the cathedra.

The inside of the basilica was richly adorned with polished marble, lamps and tapestries. But the characteristic medium of Christian art during that period—and long thereafter in the Eastern church—was the mosaic. Walls were covered with pictures made of very small colored pieces of stone, glass, or porcelain. Usually these mosaics represented scenes from the Bible or from Christian tradition. Sometimes there was also a mosaic of the person who had paid for the building, and this person is often depicted in the act of presenting a small replica of the basilica. Naturally, the main wall to be decorated was that of the apse. This usually was a great mosaic representing either the Virgin with the Child on her lap, or Christ seated in glory, as supreme ruler of the universe. This depiction of Christ, known as the *pantokrator* ("universal ruler")—shows the impact of the new political situation on Christian art, for Christ is depicted as sitting on a throne, very much like a Roman emperor.

Near the basilica stood other buildings. The most important of these was the baptistery, large enough to accommodate several dozen people. The main feature within the baptistery, usually at the center, was the baptismal pool, into which one descended by a series of steps. Its shape usually had symbolic value—round or womb-shaped to signify the new birth, shaped as a coffin to symbolize the death of the old person and the rising of a new one, octagonal to remind believers that in Christ a new age, "the eighth day of creation," had dawned, etc. Here baptism was celebrated, normally by immersion, by pouring, or by a combination of the two, where those to be baptized knelt in the water, and then had water poured over them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. (Actually, these were the normal ways of administering baptism at least until the ninth century. Baptism by dabbing water on the head had been practiced long before that, but usually only in extreme conditions of poor health, deathbed baptisms, or scarcity of water. It was in the colder areas of Western Europe, in the ninth century, that this alternate form of baptism became more common. In Italy baptism by immersion was continued until the thirteenth century, and the Eastern churches—Greek, Russian, and so forth—still baptize by immersion.)

In the middle of the baptistery a great curtain separated the room in two,

one side for men and the other for women—for in the fourth century one still descended to the waters naked, and was given a white robe on rising from them.

All this serves to illustrate what was taking place as a result of Constantine's conversion. The ancient church continued its traditional customs. Communion was still the central act of worship, celebrated every Sunday. Baptism was still generally by entering into the water, and kept a great deal of its ancient symbolism. But changes brought about by the new situation could be seen everywhere. Thus, the great question that the church faced at this time was to what degree and how it should adapt to the changed circumstances.

REACTIONS TO THE NEW ORDER

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 of Caesarea.

Others took the opposite tack. For them, the fact that the emperors now declared themselves Christian, and that for this reason people were flocking to the church, was not a blessing, but rather a significant loss. Some who tended to look at matters under this light, but did not wish to break communion with the rest of the church, withdrew to the desert, there to lead a life of meditation and asceticism. Since martyrdom was no longer possible, these people believed that the true athlete of Christ must continue training, if no longer for martyrdom, then for monastic life. The fourth century thus witnessed a massive exodus of the most devout Christians to the deserts of Egypt and Syria. This early monastic movement will be the subject of Chapter 15.

Others with a negative reaction to the new state of affairs felt that the best course was simply to break communion with the church at large, now become the imperial church, which was to be considered sinful and apostate. To these we shall turn in Chapter 16.

Among those who remained in the church, withdrawing neither into the desert nor into the schism, there was a great deal of intellectual activity. As in every such period, there were some who proposed theories and doctrines that the rest of the church felt it had to reject. Most important of these was

Arianism, which gave rise to bitter controversies regarding the doctrine of the Trinity. In Chapter 17 we shall discuss these controversies up to the year 361, when Julian became emperor.

Julian's reign marked the high point of another attitude toward Constantine's conversion: pagan reaction. Chapter 18 will deal with that reign and the attempt to revitalize paganism.

Most Christians, however, reacted to the new situation with neither total acceptance nor total rejection. Most church leaders saw the new circumstances as offering unexpected opportunities, but also great dangers. Thus, while affirming their loyalty to the emperor, as most Christians had always done, they insisted that their ultimate loyalty belonged only to God. Such was the attitude of the great *fathers* of the church—a misnomer, for there were also mothers among them. Since both danger and opportunity were great, these leaders faced a difficult task. Perhaps not all of their decisions and attitudes were wise; but even so, this was an age of giants who would shape the church and its theology for centuries to come.