

Bogdan POPESCU

Constantine the Great and Christianity:

Church and State Commingled

Christians very often have had to follow the advice of our Saviour to be subtle as serpents and gentle as doves. We may think of the great leaders of the Church, saints, martyrs or bishops. But I believe that these words can be related to a Roman emperor, too. At the beginning of the fourth century, Constantine the Great produced a revolutionary transformation, celebrating the incredible “marriage” between the civil state and the Christian Church. During Constantine’s reign, a religion which had been persecuted and considered a dangerous sect became licita and was integrated into the life of the empire.

Equal to the Apostles

The decisive step was made through the famous Edict of Milan. In 313 Constantine and his brother-in-law, the emperor Licinius, declared Christianity a free religion in the Roman Empire: “With happy auspices ... we decided to establish rules by which respect and reverence for the deity would be secured, to give the Christians and all others liberty to follow whatever worship they choose, so that whatsoever divine and heavenly powers exist might be enabled to show favour to us and to all who live under our authority.”¹ The edict was just a meeting of two realities, a foretaste of the future relationship. A good diplomat, Constantine knew that in a pagan state a formerly persecuted religion could not be implemented overnight, so this was just the first link in his political chain.

Indeed, Constantine had to be careful. Other attempts to introduce a new religion led to great conflicts. In this way the emperor Heliogabalus tried to impose the worship of the oriental god El-Gabal in Rome. He changed the traditions and started to wear an unusual oriental ceremonial dress. He showed little respect for the Roman sacred fire and removed the statue of Minerva from the forum. The emperor was murdered after only four years, in 222.

For this reason, Constantine was to act step by step, with great patience. The close relationship between politics and religion was regarded only as an alliance but in fact shaped both sides into suitable partners. Constantine introduced new

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¹ EUSEBIUS of Caesarea, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*. New York, 1989. 322.

and unusual rituals for the Roman world into his life: prayers, celebrations of the Christian feasts and meetings with the clergy.

Christian symbols became present everywhere: a cross of precious stones appeared in his private apartments, and in front of the portico of the palace the emperor was painted holding a cross and stepping on a dragon. The apogee was no doubt his request to receive the baptism and also, for the first time in history, Constantine as a defunct emperor was the subject of the Christians. The liberated Church considered its protector “equal to the apostles” and raised him among the saints.

Christianity and the Unity of the Empire

The great gift Constantine offered to the “imperium” through Christianity was the idea of unity and common belonging. In a world divided by plots and civil wars and torn by political struggles, Constantine needed a strong common denominator. The conquered territories were vast and the Romanization of the different peoples was unable to follow the rhythm of the conquests.

Constantine understood that Christian monotheism would bind together people belonging to different cultures and religions, but he also realized that the new faith was a double-edged sword. Each heresy, each ecclesiastical struggle, could become a political struggle. The history of Byzantium abounded in civil wars provoked by religious misunderstandings. For this reason, from the beginning Constantine considered it his duty to keep dogmatic unity, as “intestine strife within the Church of God is far more evil and dangerous than any kind of war or conflict.”²

He called himself “ἐπισκοπος των εκτος” (bishop of external affairs), taking care of the social or political problems of the Church, but in fact guarding its integrity. He was engaged in the first big controversy to shake the unity of Christianity — Arianism. The emperor sent a letter to the adverse parties, convoking the first ecumenical council to Nicea in 325, and participated in the discussions: “He took his seat, too, in the midst of them, as an individual amongst many, dismissing his guards and soldiers and all whose duty was to defend his person.”³

The conflict of the Church became a political danger for the empire, a matter that necessitated the intervention of the political ruler. In 325 at Nicea, the world changed: the cæsar participated in a meeting concerning the stability of the state, surrounded not by senators, but by bishops: “The emperor gave patient audience to all alike and received every proposition with steadfast attention and by occasionally assisting the argument of each party in turn.”⁴

Arius was sent into exile, and Constantine organised a festival to celebrate the achieved religious peace and sent letters in order to request the observance of the dogmatic definitions. But Arianism was not the only danger. The emperor convoked the Council of Arles in order to overcome the dissensions provoked by Donatus, and issued an edict against Novatians, Valentinians, Marcionites and Paulines, calling them “haters and enemies of the truth and life.”⁵ The former persecutors of the Church became persecutors for the Church.

² EUSEBIUS of Caesarea, *The Life of Constantine*. New York, 1989. 523.

³ Ibid, 495. / ⁴ Ibid, 523. / ⁵ Ibid, 539.

Byzantine Clergy

This controversial alliance produced changes not only in political life but in the ecclesiastical world as well. The institutionalisation of Christianity has its roots in this period. Christian bishops, who had been chased by the preceding emperors, became public persons involved in social and political life. The new relationship with the state had its effects and the changes appeared soon: complicated titles, new Byzantine golden robes and special rights.

The bishops started to act as recognized authorities — they received funds, administered justice and counselled the emperor. Constantine accorded special attention to his new officials: “The emperor also personally inviting the society of God’s ministers distinguished them with the highest possible respect and honour, showing them favour in deed and word as persons consecrated to the service of God.”⁶

They obtained the right to request money from the political administration in order to build churches: “We also empower you and the others through you to demand what is needful for the work, both for the provincial governors and from the Prætorian Prefect. For they have received instructions to be most diligent in obedience to your Holiness’s orders.”⁷ A new interconnection between Church and state took place — the ministers of God giving orders to the political officials. They learned and adopted the complicated Byzantine protocol, trying to adapt to the new reality.

In order to help the Christian community, they had to educate themselves in political subtleties. The growth and welfare of the Church depended upon their newly acquired skills. They began to analyse how to “give to Cæsar what belongs to Cæsar” in order to obtain rights and favours necessary for the existence of the Church. Eusebius described the protocol of the great council of Nicea: “He waited until the bishops had beckoned to him and then sat down, and after him the whole assembly did the same.”⁸

The Christian ministers became usual guests of the emperor, participating in public festivals, making the new faith present in the worldly meetings of Byzantium. The bishop of Cæsarea, presenting the feast of Constantine’s “Vicennalia,” specified that the ministers of God “were the emperor’s own companions at the table, while others reclined on couches arranged on either side.”⁹

The decisions of the hierarchs became official statements which could not be annulled by the secular governors and gradually the “sacerdotium” became a new well-known force in the state of Constantine. The bishops started to participate even in the military campaigns of the emperor. The way to the “just Christian war” was opened: “They, on the other hand, cheerfully declared their willingness to follow in his train, disclaiming any desire to leave him, and engaging to battle with and for him by supplication to God on his behalf.”¹⁰

From Catacombs to the Byzantine Church

The changes in the Church, however, were greater than the influences at the upper level. The whole structure was adapted to this coexistence. All the properties confiscated during the persecutions were given back and the losses compen-

sated for. It was no longer possible to speak about a poor Church. Important buildings, vast lands and precious treasures were given to the Church and formed the wealth of the new Byzantine institution.

The letter which Constantine sent to Aulinus, the proconsul of Africa is eloquent: "If any of the former property of the Catholic Church of the Christians in the several cities or other places is now in the possession either of citizens or of any other persons, it shall be restored forthwith to the said churches, inasmuch as we have determined that whatever the said churches formerly possessed shall be restored to its rightful owners."¹¹ We can imagine the revolution that the mandate produced in the empire.

The pagan owners of the confiscated houses and lands had to renounce their properties in favour of the Christians: "We order therefore that all things whatsoever which shall appear righteously to belong to the churches, whether the property consist of house or fields and gardens, or whatever the nature of it may be, shall be restored in their full value and integrity, and with undiminished right of possession."¹²

Also all the tombs of the martyrs and the cemeteries were transferred to the possession of the Church. The Christian institution received the right to inherit the goods of its members who died without successors. The ministers were kept free from public duties, in order to take care of their communities. The Church was tax-exempt and more than that, she was awarded important funds.

Another important mutation was produced in the life of the Roman state when her ruler demolished old pagan sanctuaries and built Christian edifices. In this way the temple of Venus of Jerusalem was demolished and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was built in the same place, only after all the old stones were removed and the desecrated earth excavated. Other churches were built in Bethlehem, on the Mount of Olives, in Constantinople, Nicomedia and Mambre. A new Christian architectural style was inaugurated under the Roman influence. In fact, basilicas were originally used for civil purposes in Rome.

In the meantime, pagan edifices were destroyed in Phœnicia (Aphaca), Cilicia (the temple of Æsculapius) and Heliopolis (the temple of Venus replaced by a church). A well-known masterpiece is the Church of the Apostles in Constantinople where Constantine prepared his own tomb. The emperor endowed these buildings with all that was necessary: books, robes, ecclesiastical objects and properties.

The "bishop of external affairs" allowed the return of all the members belonging to these churches who had been sent into exile by his predecessors. New parishes had the opportunity to grow and strengthen. The returned citizens had to observe two main duties: loyalty to the emperor and faithfulness to the Church.

Another important change took place in the structure of the Christian communities. The ecclesiastical organisation followed the political one. Step by step, the canons mentioned "eparchies," "exarchates" and "dioceses." The importance of a province granted a corresponding rank for a bishop. Political and religious power went hand in hand.

11 EUSEBIUS of Caesarea, *The history of...* 324.

12 EUSEBIUS of Caesarea, *The life of...* 510.

For example, canon 17 of the fourth ecumenical council mentions: "If ... any city has been rebuilt by imperial authority, or has been built anew again, pursuant to civil and public formalities, let the order of the ecclesiastical parishes be followed."¹³ The principle of the "canonical territory" appeared under the same influence.

As in the civil state, the spiritual leader of a region administered only a certain territory. He had no right to rule or to solve the problems of other dioceses: "Bishops must not leave their own dioceses ... but on the contrary, in accordance with the canons, let the bishop of Alexandria administer the affairs of Egypt only, let the bishop of East govern the Eastern Church only ... and let the bishop of Asian diocese administer only the affairs of the Asian Church."¹⁴

The Christian Church became in this way a godly and human institution embodied in the "imperium." Protected by the state, she had the duty to educate and commend exemplary citizens who were faithful to the new Christian *cæsar* and to gain the obedience of barbarians through mission.

Christianity and Byzantine Society

There were important mutations not only in the two united institutions but in the whole Byzantine society as well. The life of normal citizens changed in a progressive way. The non-Christian celebrations lost their importance in favour of the new feasts. In 321, Constantine decreed "dies solis" as a day of rest in the Roman world and granted Christians the liberty to observe it.

The night of Easter also became an important feast and was celebrated with great honour and implemented in the public life: "He changed, too, the holy night vigil into a brightness like that of day, by causing waxen tapers of great length to be lighted throughout the city: besides which, torches everywhere diffused their light, so as to import to this mystic vigil a brilliant splendour beyond that of day."¹⁵

The governors of all provinces received an order to respect the commemorative days of the martyrs. Step by step, the pagans were encouraged in a diplomatic way to participate in the Christian celebrations and to forget their previous traditions. According to Eusebius, the "friend of God" forbade divinations, mystic rites, combats of gladiators and worship of the river Nile.

Christian symbols were erected in the cities: in Constantinople, fountains were built in the market place, representing the good shepherd and the prophet Daniel, surrounded by lions. The capital was moved to Byzantium for political and strategic reasons, but also because Rome remembered the pagan traditions through temples and statues. Constantine chose another place as the centre of a new state, grafted on the trunk of Christianity. New coins replaced the old ones and the new images were substituted for pagan representations: the emperor praying to God (*orans*) or sitting in a chariot and ascending to heaven.

Without being forced to embrace the new religion, the non-Christians were in fact assaulted by the presence and the symbols of Christianity. In an indirect way, the emperor put into practice a real advertisement. His strategy produced the anticipated effect and the percent of the Lord's servants increased. Indeed, Constantine had to face the problem of the duplicity of some officials who became Christians in order to gain political favours, and in this case he was very drastic.

Legislation was influenced by the new reality, too. New laws were elaborated for both the state and the Church. Later on, such emperors as Theodosius and Justinian elaborated substantial collections of laws concerning the ecclesiastical order. The Church started to organise her life using the canons and following a political model, and the state changed its pagan norms dramatically.

Constantine himself adapted his policy to the new ideology by taking care of the poor, orphans and widows and offering food and clothes. Eusebius believed that in this period “the sword of justice hung everywhere, and both people and municipal magistrates in every province were governed rather by paternal authority than by any constraining.”¹⁶

The regimen of prisoners was improved and the bishops received permission to oversee the way they were treated. Severe punishments were eliminated and Christian ministers had access to trials and could influence the verdict. The aforementioned historian maintained the emperor was even blamed and exploited for his clemency.

As the ecclesiastical organisation followed the civil one, also the presence of Christianity changed the political importance of places. In this way, the market town of Gaza received the name Constantia and was raised to the rank of a city. Another place in Phœnicia was rewarded with the same title.¹⁷

Very interesting seems to be the embassy sent by the king of Persia, Sapor II, on behalf of the Christians from his realm. Constantine received a message from an empire, which has been a great and dangerous enemy during the centuries, but this new message was a friendly one. Due to the Christian Church, the relationship between two rival kingdoms has changed. This way, Christianity was considered to be an important element of the external politics and a possible common denominator.¹⁸

Christian Army

After the battle of Pons Milvius, we can also speak about a different Roman army, in which the pagan standards were replaced by the “*labarum*.” In his book *Vita Constantini*, Eusebius of Cæsarea describes this turning point of history, which is related to a famous vision that Constantine had, seeing in the sky the sign of the cross and the words *in hoc signo vinces* (“in this sign you will win”).

According to Eusebius, the vision was followed by a dream which convinced him to use this symbol as the standard of the army. Also the monogram of Christ, used for centuries on the walls of the catacombs, appeared on Constantine’s flag. After the battle, the emperor added the victorious sign to his statue in Rome and confessed in the inscription of the new triumphal arch that the victory was obtained under divine influence.

In the time of the war against Licinius, new elements appeared: the presence of priests in the battlefield as the “most trustful guardians”; a cross standard, carried and defended by fifty men, the prayer of the emperor in his tabernacle. There was no longer a Roman army fighting in a civil conflict, but soldiers of Christ fighting against the forces of the evil in a “just war.”

The whole equation changed. Victory was considered won not by means of a suitable strategy but by the grace of God, who rewarded the good deeds of the

16 Ibid, 550. / 17 Ibid, 542. / 18 Ibid, 502–503.

emperor. While before, Christianity was considered incompatible with military service, the formerly exiled soldiers were rehabilitated to serve God and the country: "Others, whose religious constancy had cost them the forfeiture of their military rank, were vindicated by the emperor's generosity from this dishonour."¹⁹

Fighters who had previously hunted Christians were asked to pray before battles and on each Sunday. Eusebius records also a prayer prescribed by Constantine himself for these occasions: "We acknowledge Thee the only God: we own Thee as our king and implore Thy succour. By Thy favour have we gotten the victory, through Thee are we mightier than our enemies. We render thanks for Thy past benefits and trust Thee for future blessings. Together we pray to Thee and beseech Thee long to preserve to us safe and triumphant, our emperor Constantine and his pious sons."²⁰

The Christian faith also conferred cohesion, identity and a common goal unto this army. The warriors coming from different nations and traditions did not fight because they were Byzantines, but because they were Christians and had to defend their religion. Greeks and Armenians succeeded on Constantinople's throne, but the identity of the empire was kept. How? The only possible answer is the spiritual identity. The empire did not fall until the non-Christian soldiers conquered the "Holy City." Over the centuries, the Byzantines did not defend an empire which swallowed their former nations and states, but the centre and symbol of Christianity.

Dove and Serpent in Symphony

The symphony, however, was attended only gradually. The innovations of Constantine merely represented an important step and an open door. The emperor had to be subtle and gentle in the meantime. He could not give up all the old Roman traditions. But his successors, except Julian the Apostate (331–363), continued this evolution. Gratian (367–383) renounced in 382 the title "Pontifex Maximus" (the highest pontiff) and Theodosius I (378–395) established Christianity as a state religion on 27 February, 380.

Gradually, the pluralism of the Roman world was transformed into a symphonic reality, into a state governed by the two-headed eagle – the lay power and the ecclesiastical one, the emperor and the patriarch. Due to Constantine's diplomacy, the history of the world changed at the beginning of the fourth century. The empire found a new common denominator, stronger than the Roman identity, which bound together different nations and traditions. Other emperors tried to use oriental religions like Mithraism for the same purpose, but their attempts has been unsuccessful. Constantine knew how to use the double-edged sword of this cooperation.

After the reign of Constantine, many emperors overran the limits of their authority and tried to influence and lead the Christian Church. I would stress the positive side of this cooperation, which is not worthless. The successors of Constantine gave Christianity the chance to spread throughout the whole Roman world, to win more quickly and easily the battle against other faiths, and to elaborate the doctrine through ecumenical councils. Constantine knew how to start

the cooperation in a diplomatic way, avoiding the mistakes made by Heliogabalus. Step by step, he invited the citizens of the empire to embrace the new religion and became the first Christian Roman emperor.

Suggested Reading

EUSEBIUS of Cæsarea, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*. New York, 1989.

EUSEBIUS of Cæsarea, *The Life of Constantine*. New York, 1989.

CUMMINGS D., *The Rudder*. Chicago, 1957.

STURZO Luigi, *Church and State*. Indiana, 1962.

Bogdan POPESCU:

Constantin Le Grand et le Christianisme: l'Église et l'état en communion

Au début du quatrième siècle, Constantin Le Grand produisait une transformation révolutionnaire qui changeait l'histoire du monde. Le Christianisme devenait le dénominateur commun de l'Empire Romain et apportait l'idée de l'unité et l'appartenance commune. L'Église et l'État jouaient une nouvelle partition ensemble: la symphonie Byzantine, régie par l'aigle à deux têtes. Constantin savait comment commencer cette double coopération dans une manière diplomatique, évitant les erreurs faites par les Empereurs précédents. Du fait de sa diplomatie, l'Église Chrétienne devint une institution divine et humaine incorporée dans l'*Impérium*. Protégée par l'Etat, la nouvelle tête de l'aigle Romain avait le devoir d'éduquer les citoyens exemplaires qui étaient fidèles au nouveau César chrétien et afin de gagner l'obéissance des barbares par la mission.

Bogdan POPESCU:

Constantino el Grande y el Cristianismo: la fusión Iglesia – Estado

A principios del siglo cuarto, Constantino el Grande produjo una transformación revolucionaria que cambió la historia del mundo por completo. El cristianismo se convirtió en el denominador común del Imperio Romano, y trajo consigo la idea de unidad y común pertenencia. La Iglesia y el Estado comenzaron un nuevo marcador juntos: la sinfonía bizantina, gobernada por el águila de las dos cabezas. Constantino supo cómo comenzar esta cooperación de doble filo de una forma diplomática, evitando los errores de los anteriores emperadores. Gracias a su diplomacia, la Iglesia Cristiana se convirtió en una institución divina y humana encarnada en el "imperium". Protegida por el estado, la nueva cabeza del águila romana tenía el deber de educar ciudadanos ejemplares que fueran fieles al nuevo cesar cristiano, y ganar la obediencia de los bárbaros a través de la misión.