

ST. CONSTANTINE THE GREAT, EQUAL TO THE APOSTLES: WARRIOR FOR CHRIST

by

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Chapter XXVIII. Accordingly he called on Him with earnest prayer and supplications that He would reveal to him who He really was, and stretch forth His right hand to help him in his present difficulties. And while He was thus praying with fervent entreaty, a most marvelous sign appeared to him from heaven, the account of which it might have been hard to believe had it been related by any other person. But since the victorious emperor himself long afterwards declared it to the writer of this history, when he as honoured with his acquaintance and society, and confirmed his statement by oath, who could hesitate to accredit the relation, especially since the testimony of after-time has established its truth? He said that about noon, when the day was already beginning to decline, he saw with his own eyes the trophy of a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, and bearing the inscription, CONQUER BY THIS. At this sight he himself was struck with amazement, and his whole army also, which followed him on this expedition, and *witnessed* (emphasis supplied) the miracle.

...

Chapter XXIX. ...; then in his sleep the Christ of God appeared to him with the same sign which he had seen in the heavens, and commanded him to make a likeness of that sign which he had seen in the heavens, and to use it as a safeguard in all engagements with his enemies.

...

Chapter XXXII. ... They affirmed that He was God, the only-begotten Son of the one and only God: that the sign which had appeared was the symbol of immortality, and the trophy of that victory over death which He had gained in time past when sojourning on earth. They taught him also the causes of His advent, and explained to him the true account of His incarnation. Thus he was instructed in these matters, and was impressed with wonder at the divine manifestation which had been presented to his sight. Comparing, therefore, the heavenly vision with the interpretation given, he found his judgment confirmed; and, in the persuasion that the knowledge of these things had been imparted to

him by Divine teaching, he determined thenceforth to devote himself to the reading of the inspired writings...¹

The greatest Roman Emperor succeeded his father, Constantius, in 306 A.D. at York. Subsequently, after crossing the Alps, he defeated Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge in 312 near Rome. This victory “made him sole Emperor of the West”.² Before the battle at the Milvian Bridge, he had seen a flaming cross in the sky inscribed “In this Conquer”. This profoundly affected Constantine and caused his conversion to Christianity. In 313, he was instrumental in issuing the Edict of Milan, “which recognized the Christian Church as a legal religion and tolerated all religions equally without any interference from the State”.³

From his ‘conversion’ to Christianity at the Milvian Bridge until his death in 337, he remained true to the Faith. He was baptized shortly before his demise as was somewhat common in his day. What kind of Christian was Constantine? Let’s look a bit at Constantine the man:

Constantine was the fourth century’s consummate Gladiator, relatively tall, strong, a multi-talented leader of men, soldier, leader, orator, writer, and thinker. He was the epitome of the hero we sometimes make our secular politicians out to be. The big difference between them and him perhaps was he *really* was a hero. No one could match him. His soldiers loved him. Insofar as personal strength was concerned, “he so far surpassed his compeers in personal strength as to be a terror to them”.⁴ He was “suave and affable” to all⁵ and this endeared him to his soldiers.⁶

Mentally, he was naturally intelligent and possessed sound judgment⁷ and “well-disciplined power of thought”.⁸ He was educated with thorough training in reasoning; skilled in the science of letters and arms; otherwise, he would not have been made the Roman Emperor.⁹ He approached everything with his “restless energy” and had inherited from his father his tremendous personal courage and valour.¹⁰ This was mentioned by Eusebius and almost everyone “explicitly or implicitly”.¹¹ He had “far-reaching Ambition” with a zeal to right wrongs. He was a crusader who tried to do public good with his power.¹²

He was merciful in victory in his earlier years, and he was not ‘cruel’ by the standard of the times.¹³ He was hospitable at the Council of Nicaea¹⁴ and just to “all who took refuge with him for whatever cause he treated justly and liberally”.¹⁵ He did have some of his relatives and friends put to death,¹⁶ but it is stated he did this in his capacity as Emperor/Judge as seen within the context of his times.¹⁷ As a husband, he respected marital virtue and was a good father. His was a reign of law and order.¹⁸

What about Constantine’s religious characteristics? Was he really a ‘Christian’? The overwhelming answer is yes, but the question should not be narrowed to the baptism issue although it is the gateway to salvation. We need only look to Constantine’s public acknowledgments of Christianity and his deeds in furtherance of the Faith. He acknowledged he favoured Christianity prior to his war with Maxentius:

It is universally admitted Constantine embraced the religion of the Christians previous to his war with Maxentius and prior to his

return to Rome and Italy; and this is evidenced by the dates of the laws which he enacted in favour of religion.¹⁹

In the opinion of the bishops assembled at the Council of Nicaea, he was “most pious” and “dear to God”.²⁰ He considered himself as a “fellow-servant” of the Lord.²¹ How many of our contemporary politicians/statesmen could match Constantine’s religious life?

In his religious life he abounded in creed and confession - believing in the Trinity - the Divinity of Christ, the Atonement, the Resurrection, and Eternal Life, in repentance and Faith, in love to God, and love to man. He preached his faith on all occasions; he practiced thanksgiving and prayer abundantly. He *regarded everything that he had or was as from God.* (emphasis supplied)²²

Constantine has been ranked as “standing to modern statesmen as Athanasius to modern theologians”.²³ His prayer and confession of faith in God and Christ below bear witness to the true orthodox Christianity of Constantine:

A prayer. ‘Not without cause, O holy God, do I prefer this prayer to Thee, the Lord of all. Under Thy guidance have I devised and accomplished measures fraught with blessing: preceded by The sacred sign, I have led Thy armies to victory: and still on occasion of public danger, I follow the same symbol of Thy perfections while advancing to meet the foe. Therefore have I dedicated to Thy service a soul attempered by love and fear. For Thy name I truly love, while I regard with reverence that power of which Thou hast given abundant proofs, to the confirmation and increase of my faith.’²⁴

...

A confession of faith in God and in Christ. ‘This God I confess that I hold in unceasing honour and remembrance; this God I delight to contemplate with pure and guileless thoughts in the height of His glory.’ ‘His pleasure is in works of moderation and gentleness. He loves the meek and hates the turbulent spirit, delighting in faith. He chastises unbelief.’ (Ad Sap.) ‘He is the supreme judge of all things, the prince of immortality, the giver of everlasting life.’²⁵

Let us ask ourselves a few questions, then close and think about them as we go about our daily lives:

Does our faith shine through as Constantine the Great's does so brilliantly? Do we have complete faith in Christ as he had at the Milvian Bridge and throughout his public life? What separates us from St. Constantine? Are we ready to put on Christ's armor and wield our shields against the evil one? The only thing that might separate us from him is Faith. Have faith, undying faith in Christ, and live daily what we preach! Then we will be on the road to join him when the Lord returns.

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Eusebius, *Conversion of Constantine*, Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 2nd series (New York: Christian Literature Co., 1990), *Vol I*, pp. 489-491, included on web site <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/conv-const.html>.

² Eusebius, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine* (tr. by G.A. Williamson; rev/ed/intro by Andrew Louth), Penguin Books, London, 1965, reprinted with revisions and new editorial matter in 1989, see "Who's Who in Eusebius," p. 358.

³ *St. Constantine the Great*, p. 1 at <http://stgeorge.ia.goarch.org/constantine.htm>.

⁴ Ecumen. c. 17, V.C. 1. 19, cited at *Constantine the Great, Chapters I and II, Prolegomena*, p. 7 of 17, at <http://www.synaxis.org/ecf/volume24/ECF00013.htm>.

⁵ V.C. 3. 13, *id.*

⁶ Lact. c. 18, *id.*

⁷ V.C. 1. 19, *id.*

⁸ Theoph. p. 29, *id.*

⁹ Lydus de Magist. 3. 33, *id.*, p. 8.

¹⁰ Paneg. 307, c. 3, *id.*

¹¹ K.C. 1. 11, *id.*

¹² *id.*

¹³ *id.*, pp. 9-10.

¹⁴ Eusebius, V. C. 4. 49, *id.*, p. 11.

¹⁵ Paneg. 307. 5, *id.*

¹⁶ *id.*, p. 12.

¹⁷ *id.*, p. 13.

¹⁸ *id.*

¹⁹ Sozomen, Soz. 1. 5, cf 1. 3, *id.*, p. 14.

²⁰ E.P. Synod. in Socr. 1. 9; Theodoret, 1. 8, *id.*, p. 15.

²¹ *id.*

²² *id.*, p. 17.

²³ *id.*

²⁴ Ap. prov. Or., *id.*, p. 16.

²⁵ *id.*