

The Conversion of Rome

Intro: This lesson will cover the beginning of Christendom - when the church became united to the state and Christianity became a dominant cultural influence in the Roman Empire.

Constantine



- Reigned from 306-337.
- He was a coemperor with Licinius between 311 and 324.
- He was the illegitimate son of a Roman military leader (Constantius) and a Christian freedwoman named Helena.
- Even before his conversion, Constantine thought that Christianity could be used to help save classical culture; Christianity had practical benefits even if it was untrue.
- He founded one of the most important cities in history and named it after himself - "Constantinople."

In This Sign Conquer

In 312 Constantine was overwhelmed at a Battle at the Milvian bridge over the Tiber River. He was fighting a rival to the imperial throne named Maxentius. He supposedly had a vision of a Christian symbol with the Latin phrase "In Hoc Signo Vinces" ("in this sign conquer"). He had his troops put a XP (chi-rho, the first two letters of the word "Christ" in Greek) on their shields and banners. He won this battle and took the victory as a sign of favor from the Christian God. However, some think that the real reason Constantine promoted Christianity was because it could unite his fracturing empire.



In 313 he passed the Edict of Toleration which made Christianity a *religio licita* (legal religion). Christianity had gone from being illegal to being an official religion of the Roman Empire overnight.

Churches were given their property back and subsidized by the state, clergy were exempted from public service, and Sunday was declared an official day of rest and worship (which was the same day that the cult of the “invincible sun” worshipped its god). In 380 and 381 Theodosius I made Christianity the official religion of the empire. By 392 all pagan worship (private and public) was forbidden.

The term “paganism” was invented around this time in church history. The Latin word “*paganus*” means “rustic” but has the connotation of “hillbilly” or “bumpkin.” This term came about because it was the people in villages who were still worshipping rivers, trees and the old Roman gods - the more refined people, the Christians, called these backwoods superstitious people “pagans.”

It was Constantine who called the famous Council of Nicaea in 325.

Was Constantine Really a Christian?



- The Eastern Orthodox Church thinks he was because, to them, he is a saint: “St. Constantine the Great.”
- He delayed baptism until his death bed.
- He retained the title “*Pontifex Maximus*” (“chief priest”) of the pagan state religion.
- He continued worshipping the sun. The worship of “the unconquered Sun” (*Sol Invictus*) happened on Sunday, so it was convenient that Christians also worshipped on Sunday.
- The senate voted to make him a god after his death.
- He killed his son and his wife.
- He was baptized by Eusebius of Nicomedia (the guy who fought for Arianism at the Council of Nicaea), and one of Constantine’s other sons, Constantius II was Arian.
- Christianity seems to be the means that he used to unify his empire. How much he really believed Christian doctrine is a matter of debate. He did seem to think that the Christian God would bless him if he made life easier for Christians. Most likely he honored the Christian God but was not fully given over to him or to Christian doctrine.

The pros and cons of having the Roman Empire adopt Christianity

Pros

- Christians were not being persecuted anymore.
- Women and slaves were treated better in Christianity than in paganism.
- The gladiatorial games were outlawed.
- Church offices were granted tax-exempt status.
- Brandings on the face were made illegal.
- Missionary work happened much more easily.
- Sexual immorality and infanticide became illegal.
- Christians were free to flourish in the arts (theology, philosophy, history, art, etc.).

Cons

- It allowed the emperor too much control over the church.
- It allowed for many false conversions.
- Pagan practices were brought into the church

- Saint worship was substituted for hero worship.
- Christians still practiced pagan magic.
- Some Christians even attended the gladiatorial games.
- Worship began to be influenced by imperial protocol.
 - Pastors began wearing luxurious robes and garments.
 - Incense began to be used in worship as at imperial functions.
 - Pastors were called “priests” and the communion table was called an “altar” in imitation of their pagan counterparts.
 - Only the priests could access the altar - the laity could not. This is because at Roman functions the Roman officials were separate from the commoners.
- Some Christians persecuted pagans (and Jews) by destroying their temples and even using violence against them.
- Since the bishopric was a position of social esteem, some people sold church offices and took bribes.
- The “narrow road” of Christianity had become wide!

Other interesting things at this time in church history

-A man Julian became the emperor in 361. He is known as “Julian the Apostate” because he tried to turn the empire back to paganism. He took back all of the church’s privileges, and even forbid any Christians from teaching classical authors. He was killed by being hit by a spear in battle and, according to legend, his last words were, “you have won, Galilean.”

-St. Patrick was actually British, not Irish. He was captured by Irish pirates when he was 16 and stayed in Ireland for 6 years. Upon returning to Britain he felt called to become a missionary to the Irish people. From 432-461 he ministered there and was opposed by the Druid religion.



-The primary way that baptism was done until the 9th century was by full immersion. Pouring on the head was also common. But dabbing on the head or sprinkling (as in many denominations today) was only used for people who were really sick, and was not a common feature of the early church. In Italy baptism by immersion continued until the 13th century, and the Greek Orthodox church has always done baptism by immersion

(even of infants). The first person on record to baptize infants is Irenaeus and it wasn't until the 3rd century. Hippolytus, Tertullian, and Justin Martyr had all said that baptism was reserved for believers.

Baptistries were often in one of three shapes: a womb to symbolize new birth, a coffin to symbolize death and resurrection, or an octagon to symbolize the "eighth day of creation" which is the new age inaugurated in Christ.



-The church government moved away from a plurality of elders to an emphasis on bishops (individual pastors who had authority over several churches). There was also a primacy put on the bishop of Rome (the first certain date for a single Bishop in Rome is Urban I – c. 220-230). This happened for several reasons.

- The Greek term "overseer" in the New Testament, since it is a different word than "elder," was seen as a distinct office.
- It was easier to oversee the churches administratively with one bishop.
- It provided someone who could answer disputes between lower churches.
- It was used to protect orthodoxy from false teaching.
 - The bishops could show a direct line of ordination from the apostles.
 - The bishops could appeal to tradition to show how scripture should be interpreted.

Monks and Monasteries

With the growing worldliness and opulence of the church, many sought a way of life that was more like Jesus (homeless, poor, and a servant) - thus giving birth to monasticism.

The word "monk" comes from the word "*monachos*" or "*monos*" which means "solitary" or "alone."

Some monks who originated before the time of Constantine are often called "desert fathers" because they sought to live by themselves in the Egyptian desert to get away from society. They practiced extreme asceticism such as eating only dates, fasting, wearing itchy sackcloth, living in caves, and sleeping only on a mat. The most famous of these desert fathers are Paul of Thebes and St. Anthony.



Some monks were really weird! One monk, Macarius, was so remorseful for having killed a mosquito that he lived for six months in a swamp allowing mosquitos to bite him. Another monk, Simon the Stylite lived for several months buried up to his neck. After that he lived for over 30 years on the top of a 60-foot pole. Another monk, Ammoun, never undressed or bathed after becoming a monk.

What's new about monasticism after Constantine is that monks decided to live together communally (called "cenobitic monasticism"). Pachomius organized the first monastery in 320.

- Monks thought that temptation came from being around a wealthy Christian society (instead of the temptation being within them).
- They were celibate and some even castrated themselves.
- Due to gnostic and neoplatonic influences they thought that the body and physical things were bad.
- They didn't like the syncretism being brought into the church from half-converted pagans.
- The caves of the desert and the food produced by the Nile made withdrawing from society possible.

- Monks took a vow of poverty, chastity, and obedience.
- Monks were excellent farmers, cattle breeders, and beer-brewers.
- Monasteries often provided a place of sanctuary for those in need and doubled as hospitals.
- The head over several monasteries is called an “abbot” or “archimandrite.”
- Friars are monks who live out their ideals among the people of a community instead of in a monastery.
- Benedict of Nursia (480-547) founded the monastery at Monte Cassino and is seen as a major leader of western monasticism. His *Rule of St. Benedict* was a list of 73 instructions to regulate the life of the monks and 12 steps of humility to help them reach heaven.

Martin of Tours

The most influential work to popularize the monastic ideal was the *Life of Saint Martin*. Martin of Tours had pagan parents and to prevent him from becoming a Christian his dad enrolled him in the army. Upon entering a town in France, Martin saw a beggar shivering in the cold who asked him for alms. Martin didn't have money, so he took his sword and cut his heavy military cloak in half and gave half to the beggar. Later, in a dream, Jesus came to Martin wearing half of a soldier's cape and said, “Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.” The word “chapel” comes from “capella” which means “cape” and is a reference to the fact that many small churches claimed to have a piece of Martin's cape. He was disciplined by Hilary of Poitiers.



When Martin was supposed to be announced as bishop many opposed him because he was dirty and unrefined. During a scripture reading the passage read was Psalm 8:2 “Out of the mouth of

babies and infants, you have established strength because of your foes, to still the enemy and the avenger.” This was taken as a direct message from heaven that Martin should become the bishop. He became the ideal bishop in that he opposed the wealth and pomp experienced in much of the church.

Does the Bible promote monasticism and asceticism?

1 Corinthians 5:9–10 - I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world.

John 17:15 - I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.

Colossians 2:21–23 - “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch”²² (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings?²³ These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

1 Timothy 4:1–4 - Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons,² through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared,³ who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.⁴ For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving.

Three lessons to learn from this time in church history

1. To what degree should the church and state be united?
2. To what degree should the church adopt cultural practices to reach the lost?
3. Withdrawing from society is never the answer.