

Back to the Roots – The Early Church

Church expansion during time of persecution

Did the Church wither away during this time of persecution?

- AD 100: 10,000 Christians
- AD 200: 200,000 Christians
- AD 250: 2,000,000 Christians
- In Fourth century, the church became legally protected by the Emperor Constantine, and the age of the church as a tiny, harassed minority was over
- After that point, the types of challenges the church would face would be different

Persecution Today

How many Christians are persecuted today?

- 260 Mio Christians in countries where persecution is common experience high levels of persecution, this is an increase of 6% over 2019
- 2,983 Christians were killed for their faith, 9,488 churches were attacked, 3,711 believers were detained without a trial, arrested, sentenced or imprisoned
- The leading factor is adherence to Sharia law
- 83% of the global population lives in places with high religious restrictions
- 500 mio. worldwide are persecuted for their faith, 65% of those are Christians
- Pew research indicates that Christians are harassed for their faith in 144 countries
- By some reports, more Christians have died in the last 100 years than all the prior centuries combine since the time of Jesus' birth
- Gordon-Conwell's Center for the Study of Global Christianity's annual [report](#) on the persecution of Christians say nearly 1 million Christians were martyred from 2005 to 2015

The Ascent of Constantine

The situation prior to Constantine's "conversion"

- Diocletian's edict – Christian soldiers kicked out of military or executed.
- Persecution led by Galerius, who convinced Diocletian to make the edict against Christians
- Christians were then removed from Government positions, and books were destroyed
- Those who refused were tortured and condemned to death
- Fire broke out in Palace, Christians were blamed
- Christians forced to make sacrifice to Roman gods

- Leaders of churches were arrested, members forced to make sacrifice to Roman gods
- Many Christians were not used to torture, and recanted
- Some hid, others fled
- Galerius, who had been one of the rulers within Rome ascended to ultimate power, and took the title of Augustus in 305AD, as did Constantius Chlorus, the father of Constantine
- Constantine was very popular in the military, and when his father died, his troops proclaimed him Augustus (along with Galerius)
- Galerius became very sick, and backed down in his persecution of the Christians, but required Christians to pray for him
- Prisons were opened, and a few days later Galerius died.
- At this point, several emperors were in place.
- Constantine defeated his rivals

Constantine's "conversion"

- Constantine had a vision whereby he was commanded to place a Christian symbol on his soldiers shields and banners.
- Constantine placed Greek letters "Chi" "Rho" on their shields, and early Christogram (a combination of letters that forms an abbreviation for the name of Christ)



- Constantine defeated his rival in Rome and became the leader of the western Empire.
- "Edict of Milan" (313 AD) – stopped the persecution of Christians

Constantine becomes Sole Emperor

- In 322 AD, Constantine became sole emperor until his death in 337 AD
- Constantine wanted to restore the glory and power of the empire, but unlike previous emperors, wanted to do this not by worshipping the Roman gods, but by following Christ
- He decided to create a new, more glorious version of Rome, Constantinople (city of Constantine)
- Would be bridge between eastern and western empire
- Would place in a good position between his eastern and western enemies
- City would play a role for centuries, and stood as the capital of the Eastern Roman empire a thousand years after the west fell
- Walls were extended, and inhabitants given special rights, city grew
- Statues of ancient gods were used as ornaments in the city
- Normally conversion was accompanied by a long period of instruction as a catechumen. Constantine never went through this process.
- Constantine considered himself to be “bishop of bishops”, but continued to take part in pagan rights, and was not baptized until his baptism
- The church regarded him as somebody favored Christianity, was not himself a Christian.
- The period at which Constantine placed the Chi Rho on his labarum (standard), he was going to battle against Rome. The aristocracy in Rome were followers of the ancient gods, and would not have been inclined to support him as a result of this action. This conversion then would have been of doubtful political or military value by all appearances.

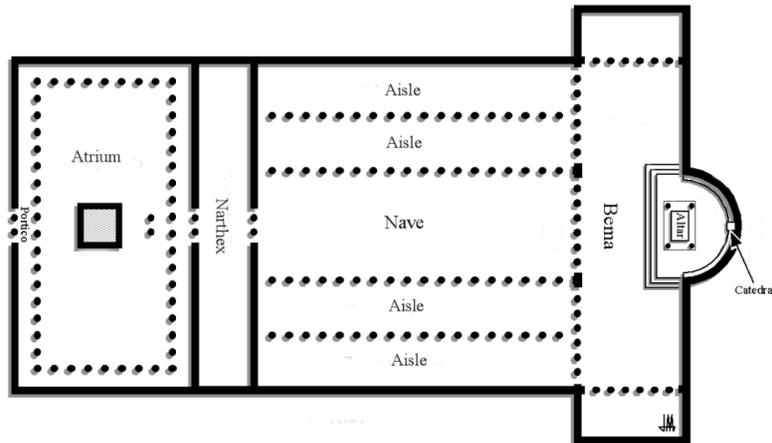
Constantine the Christian?

- Constantine was probably a believer in the power of Christ
- Constantine seemed to be a sincere man, but with a meagre understanding of the Christian faith
- He continued to follow the unconquered sun, he may have believed this god was the same as the Christian god.
- He initially put an end to persecution, and returned property
- He later donated a palace in Rome to the church
- The official religion was paganism, and Constantine was a pagan high priest.
- He appointed many Christians to high positions in government positions
- Many of his rivals in the Senate were pagans, appointing these Christians would have bolstered his power

The Impact of Constantine on the Church

- AD 324 – Imperial Edict - Soldiers were ordered to worship the supreme being the first day of the week
- This first day of the week was the day of worship of Christians, but also the day of the unconquered sun
- AD325 – Ecumenical council took place in Nicaea, Constantine put imperial property at the service of the council
- New lavish churches were built
- Constantine became one of the pagan gods. The Eastern church canonized him as a saint, so he was both a Christian saint and a pagan god.
- He never made Christianity the official religion of the empire, and he remained a pagan.
- His sons favored Christianity
- In 356, Constantius, (his son) made the worship of images a capital crime, though this was generally ignored
- His nephew Julian led a pagan reaction, and was called Julian the apostate
- Subsequent rulers tended to favor Arianism
- Not until AD382 the government stopped supporting paganism
- 391 pagan sacrifice was outlawed, and 392, pagan worship was forbidden
- Now, Christianity was favored, and pagan temples were often demolished or sacked, sometimes by Christians
- Persecution of Christians came to a stop
- Privileges were granted including tax exemptions for church properties and ability to bequeath property to the church
- Church came to own vast lands
- 1800 bishops and other clergy were tax exempt and also didn't need to perform public labor required of others
- Bishops were given free access to imperial posts
- Arrogance and corruption arose, such as the purchase of bishoprics
- Bishops came to have judicial powers, and bribery arose
- New dangers threatened the church now that it was powerful
- For laity, we see evidence of syncretism
- Christians gathered easily on the first day of the week

- Worship first in homes, catacombs, then in special structures for worship
- Christian worship was increasingly influenced by imperial protocol, such as featuring incense (was sign of respect for emperor)
- Ministers wore luxurious garments, as were called “priests” in imitation of pagan counterparts
- Communion table became an altar
- Prayer was now given kneeling, as people kneeled before emperor
- Choirs were developed, congregation had less active role
- Churches were built where the relics of a martyr were present. Martyrs were sometimes unearthed, and placed under the altars
- Relics of saints came to be believed to have special powers.
- The mother of Constantine (Helena) had a vision of where Jesus’ cross was buried. An excavation was conducted, and a cross was found, it was believed to have held power. Pieces of wood that “came from it” were found all over the Empire.
- This type of superstition was preached against, but the church had so many new converts that these ideas inevitably made their way into the church
- The long period of training for baptism was shortened to streamline the process, and subsequently, superstition within the church increased, and the witness of the church suffered.
- Churches were given new form, with an altar in the center, and a rectangular form of a basilica, a structure of naves with rows or columns. Churches built in this manner came to be known as basilicas.
 - Atrium (entryway with a fountain for ritual washing), side of atrium was narthex with doors to naves.
 - Naves – most spacious section, including section reserved for choir and pulpit
 - Sanctuary at end of nave at higher level with altar
 - Chair for bishop called “cathedra” which gave rise to word cathedral
 - Richly adorned with mosaic made of stone, glass or porcelain, as well as marble, stone images, etc.
 - Image of Christ who appeared like an emperor
 - Baptistry – baptismal pool into which one descended for immersion, pouring or both. This practice was continued until around the 9th century



Reactions to the new order

- Development of a new theology
- Some saw this as a blessing
- Others saw it as a curse, and went out to the desert to train as an athlete of Christ
- Many of the most devout Christians moved to the deserts of Syria and Egypt
- Others broke communion with the imperial church who were regarded as apostate (Donatists)
- Within the imperial church, false doctrines were sometimes spread, including Arianism
- Most Christians and church leaders saw both opportunities and dangers, affirming their loyalty to emperor, but ultimately only to God

Reactions – Monasticism

- Monasticism has multiple roots:
 - Christian desire to devote all energies to worshipping God,
 - Gnostic ideas about the physical being inferior to the spiritual,
 - Stoic ideas about subjugating the physical passions
- Word “Monk” comes from Greek word “Monachus”, which means solitary
- Paul and Anthony are examples of early monks (prior to Constantine)
- Monks led an ascetic life, sometimes weaved baskets and mats, traded these for other bare essentials
- Ate very basic diets, mostly bread
- Had few possessions, clothing, and mat to lie on

- Didn't keep books (these could lead to pride), spent time memorizing scripture
- These often despised the "priests" of the official church
- Some of these came to believe that their way of life was more holy, and that they should be the ones to decide matters of life and doctrine within the church (despite their general ignorance)

Monastic communities

- In time, the monastic ideal spread, and attracted many followers
- Monasteries developed for both men and women
- These people were often required to give up all their possessions, to live in poverty, serve others and promise complete obedience to their superiors
- They farmed, worked, sold goods to meet their own needs and give to the poor
- They would gather multiple times a day to sing and hear scripture read
- The abbot had absolute authority, and would also name his successor
- Those wishing to join would stand at the gate for several days and nights begging to be let in. These would live in the community for a long period of time before being allowed to officially join, and were eventually given a role
- Many of these were not even Christian, and would need to be catechized
- These monks practiced a life of extreme spiritual discipline in the days of "easy believe-ism" that prevailed after Constantine

Martin of Tours

- Born AD335 in Pannonia (current Hungary)
- Father was a pagan soldier
- Against his parent's will, he decided to become a Christian
- His father forced him to join the military to force him away from his contacts
- While serving in current day France, Martin encountered a beggar who was cold and shivering
- Martin took his soldier's cape, cut it in two, and gave half to the beggar
- Soon after, Martin was baptized, and left the military and befriended the bishop of Tours
- He eventually became a monk outside the city of Tours and lived in poverty, and he became well known for his saintly life
- The people of Tours elected him Bishop after the old Bishop died

- Centuries later, a small church held the remains of Martin's cape, or Capella
- The word for Capella became synonymous with the church, and thereafter small churches like this were called "Capellas" or "chapels". Those who served in chapels were called chaplains
- The monasteries slowly became a church organization where people lived in celibacy, shared all their goods, obeyed their superiors, and helped the poor
- Normal lay people were excluded from such a life, and so a separate class of Christian arose

Donatist Controversy

- Donatists were Christians of pro-Consular Northern Africa around Numidia Mauritania
- They were members of a movement who rejected the regularly elected Bishop of Carthage and elected one to their liking who was more rigorous in his views, his name was Donatus
- The Donatists rejected their opponents Bishop partly on the grounds that one of the Bishops that consecrated and installed their opponent had delivered copies of the scriptures to the authorities during a time of persecution
- The issues at stake included how to handle the lapsed, as well as more generally those who were more rigorous
- For the Donatists, what gave a Bishop authority was his personal holiness
 - Their emphasis was the holiness of the church
- For their opponents, the office bestowed this authority (a more traditional Roman principle)
 - These were less rigorous in maintaining the holiness of the church, preferring to leave judgement to Christ
- The split also occurred along geographical lines
- Many of those who became Donatists had been Christians prior to Constantine, and had suffered greatly.
- In time the Donatists became increasingly radical and militant, often seeking martyrdom in battle against the "corrupt" church

Donatism persisted until the region was conquered by Muslims in the 7th century