Constantine’s Gift to Christianity

October 26, 2012

On the anniversary of Constantine’s conversion, we should consider why the West seems to be converting back to paganism.

Benjamin Wiker

A 17th-century fresco in the Lateran Baptistery shows the vision of Constantine before the battle of the Milvian bridge in October 312. (Photo: Fr. Lawrence Lew, OP)

On October 28, 312, Emperor Constantine met Emperor Maxentius in battle just outside the city of Rome at the Milvian Bridge, spanning the Tiber. This battle—occurring exactly 1,700 years ago—is one of the most important events in the history of Christendom, since it was through Constantine’s victory that Christendom began. It is a battle well worth reflecting upon.

As is well known, the previous day Constantine experienced a vision of a cross of light in the sky, with the words “By this sign you shall conquer” (in Greek, not Latin, by the way). That night, so we are told, Constantine had a dream wherein he was told to paint the cross on the shields of his soldiers.

He did. And so it happened, as the vision said.

The next day, October 28, 312, Constantine defeated Maxentius. Interestingly enough, Maxentius could have stayed within the walls of Rome. He was plentifully stocked to endure a siege. Inexplicably, he decided to go out and engage Constantine. His troops were defeated, and Maxentius himself drowned in the Tiber trying to escape.

Such was the beginning of Constantine’s embrace of Christianity, and such was the beginning of the transformation of the Roman Empire from paganism to Christianity.

It is, again, a well-known story, and unfortunately, as with other well-known stories, it is not well-known enough, or at least, not thought about deeply enough.

There are, for example, those who take Constantine’s conversion as the beginning of the end of real Christianity. Christianity, they argue, is the Christianity of the early Church, the Church before it became favored and hence entangled with the empire, the pure Church, the Church before Constantine, the Church of the martyrs.

The problem with this romantic vision of the pure early Church is that it wasn’t shared by the early Church. We owe it to them to take things, first of all, from their point of view.

From very early on Christians were horribly persecuted by the pagan Roman Empire. When the famous great fire in Rome in 64 AD wreaked such destruction (whether it was caused by Nero, or merely enjoyed by him), Nero blamed the Christians as scapegoats, and made of them an imperial spectacle.

As the historian Tacitus tells us, “Their deaths were made farcical. Dressed in wild animals’ skins, they were torn to piece by dogs, or crucified, or made into torches to be ignited after dark as substitutes for daylight. Nero provided his Gardens for the spectacle, and exhibited displays in the Circus…”

Persecutions continued under the Emperors Domitian (ruled 89-96 AD), Trajan (98-117 AD), Marcus Aurelius (161-180 AD), Septimius Severus (193-211), Maximinus (235-238), Decius (249-251 AD), and Valerian (253-260 AD), and then peaked in their severity under Diocletian (284-305) and Galerius (305-311).

Leading right up to Constantine’s conversion in 312, Christians periodically suffered the most horrible treatment by the pagan Roman state.

Christians were stripped and flogged with whips, put on the rack, scraped with iron combs used to card wool, and had salt and vinegar poured over their fresh wounds; they were slowly roasted to death over fires individually or thrown on great piles to be burned alive en masse (an entire town in Phrygia—men, women, and children—was set on fire by soldiers); they were strangled or run through with swords; they were tied hand and foot, put into boats, and once pushed out to sea, drowned; they were jailed, and then led into the arena to be torn to pieces by panthers, bears, boars, and bulls; they had their skin torn bit by bit with pottery shards, or they were decapitated; women were stripped and hung upside down for public humiliation, and sometimes believers were hung this way over a fire so as to be choked by the smoke; Christians had their limbs tied to trees that were bent down and then let snap, tearing their legs or arms from their bodies; sharp reeds were driven under fingernails, molten lead was poured down backs, genitals horribly mutilated, eyes gouged out and cauterized with a hot iron, and the list goes on.

I document these very real atrocities in such detail so as to combat any notion of romanticism we might have about martyrdom. Christians then were no more romantic about such hideous treatment at the hands of a pagan state, than were Christians in the 20th century tortured and mowed down by the communist state.

If you think about what these Christians actually endured at the hands of the pagan state, you will realize with what jubilation, what extreme thankfulness to God, what declarations of it all being miraculous, Christians 1,700 years ago greeted the news of Constantine’s conversion.

And I do believe that is precisely the right attitude that Christians today should have in remembering—indeed, celebrating—the conversion of Constantine. Rarely has Divine Providence achieved so much in so short a time.

With Constantine’s favor, the Church began to blossom, and was free to spread out all over the Western, and then Eastern, parts of the Empire, thereby shifting its civilization from pagan to Christian moorings.

This was no small shift—it entailed a vast moral and political transformation that laid the foundation and built the structure of Christian civilization.

To take some poignant examples, the pagan Roman culture happily affirmed contraception, abortion, infanticide, suicide, homosexuality, homosexual marriage, euthanasia, pornography, prostitution, concubinage, divorce, pederasty, and the mass killing of human beings for entertainment in gladiatorial combat. Once the emperors became Christian, both the Church and the Christian imperium engaged in the moral transformation of pagan society, and the Christian moral understanding was incorporated into law in the various imperial codes. And also, quite unlike Rome, both the Church and Christian state began to care for the poor and destitute, the widows and orphans.

What we notice, in the list of evils smiled upon by pagan Rome and rejected by Christendom, is that so many of them have returned today. In many respects—with our contemporary affirmation of contraception, abortion, homosexuality, pornography, and so on—Christians find themselves in a society not very much different from the one in which, prior to Constantine’s conversion, Christians were so severely persecuted.

The beneficial effects of Constantine’s conversion, we might say, are coming undone. We are falling back into a pagan society where Christians are no longer welcome.

So, in this celebration of Constantine’s conversion, we should also pause to reflect more deeply on why we, in Western society, seem to be converting back to paganism.

Now all of this doesn’t mean that Constantine’s conversion was without its ambiguities. If we’re going to celebrate, it must be done soberly, so to speak.

To begin with, imperial sponsorship of Christianity did lead to periods of imperial control of the Church, and in emperors after Constantine, to the corruption of doctrine itself. Here, too, there is ambiguity.

Constantine himself called the famous Council of Nicaea (325), the council from which all Christians have received the Nicene Creed outlining the basics of the Christian faith. Contrary to our notion that everyone in the early Church was singing the same doctrinal tune, the bishops of the third-century Church were themselves split into irreconcilable factions, those who affirmed Christ’s full divinity and those who declared that he was created and hence a creature (the Arians, after the bishop Arius). Scripture itself couldn’t decide the issue because both sides were quoting it to their purposes, and in fact, the canon of the New Testament had yet to be officially decided.

Constantine demanded that the gathered bishops settle the issue (rather than, as a pagan emperor might, simply deciding the issue for himself).

All Christians holding to the Nicene Creed as the fundamental statement of orthodoxy—which really means all Christians, since deviating from the Creed means you’re something else—owe Constantine a debt of gratitude. He made the bishops settle the issue (and they did, on the side of orthodox affirmation of Christ’s full humanity and divinity). Even more amazing, he refrained from doing so himself.

But even though Nicaea turned out well, trouble soon arose, and it was, alas, related to Constantine himself. (Remember, this is a sober, well-informed celebration of Constantine).

To make a short story a bit longer, Constantine did not actually, officially, really become a Christian until very near his dying day. Like so many of the time, he held off on being baptized until the threshold of his departure. Feeling the approach of death, he very piously laid aside the royal purple, took upon himself the humble white robes of the to-be-newborn Christian, and entered the waters of regeneration.

The bishop doing the royal baptism was one Eusebius, an Arian, that is, heretical, bishop.

It would take too long to explain how that came about, but when heretical Arianism infected the imperial household, the nasty result was that heresy became the favored orthodoxy of the emperors after Constantine.

Such is the danger of royal patronage: the Church, and even its doctrine, can be defined by the state.

No doubt, that is why many who rue Constantine’s conversion do not wish to celebrate its 1,700th anniversary. It is a sobering thought, very sobering. The Church must not, cannot, be subordinate to the state. Otherwise, it becomes a mere instrument of politics.

But that doesn’t mean that the Church can happily ignore the political powers that be, or pretend that Christianity is entirely apolitical, concerned only with things of the next life.

We are now, as I said above, entering a time in history when the state is becoming more and more an adversary rather than a friend of Christianity, more like the pagan state that persecuted Christians up until the time of Constantine’s conversion.

For those wanting to gain a fresh, and I think very inviting, perspective on Constantine, I highly recommend Peter Leithart’s Defending Constantine.

While we certainly want to avoid what has been called “Constantinianism” (the subordination of the Church to the interests of the state), we should also have a very healthy appreciation of what was accomplished through his conversion.