

Chapter XX: Conversion Of Constantine.--Part I.

The Motives, Progress, And Effects Of The Conversion Of  
Constantine.--Legal Establishment And Constitution Of The Christian Or  
Catholic Church.

The public establishment of Christianity may be considered as one of those important and domestic revolutions which excite the most lively curiosity, and afford the most valuable instruction. The victories and the civil policy of Constantine no longer influence the state of Europe; but a considerable portion of the globe still retains the impression which it received from the conversion of that monarch; and the ecclesiastical institutions of his reign are still connected, by an indissoluble chain, with the opinions, the passions, and the interests of the present generation. In the consideration of a subject which may be examined with impartiality, but cannot be viewed with indifference, a difficulty immediately arises of a very unexpected nature; that of ascertaining the real and precise date of the conversion of Constantine. The eloquent Lactantius, in the midst of his court, seems impatient [1] to proclaim to the world the glorious example of the sovereign of Gaul; who, in the first moments of his reign, acknowledged and adored the majesty of the true and only God. [2] The learned Eusebius has ascribed the faith of Constantine to the miraculous sign which was displayed in the heavens whilst he meditated and prepared the Italian expedition. [3] The historian Zosimus maliciously asserts, that the emperor had imbrued his hands in the blood of his eldest son, before he publicly renounced

the gods of Rome and of his ancestors. [4] The perplexity produced by these discordant authorities is derived from the behavior of Constantine himself. According to the strictness of ecclesiastical language, the first of the Christian emperors was unworthy of that name, till the moment of his death; since it was only during his last illness that he received, as a catechumen, the imposition of hands, [5] and was afterwards admitted, by the initiatory rites of baptism, into the number of the faithful. [6] The Christianity of Constantine must be allowed in a much more vague and qualified sense; and the nicest accuracy is required in tracing the slow and almost imperceptible gradations by which the monarch declared himself the protector, and at length the proselyte, of the church. It was an arduous task to eradicate the habits and prejudices of his education, to acknowledge the divine power of Christ, and to understand that the truth of his revelation was incompatible with the worship of the gods. The obstacles which he had probably experienced in his own mind, instructed him to proceed with caution in the momentous change of a national religion; and he insensibly discovered his new opinions, as far as he could enforce them with safety and with effect. During the whole course of his reign, the stream of Christianity flowed with a gentle, though accelerated, motion: but its general direction was sometimes checked, and sometimes diverted, by the accidental circumstances of the times, and by the prudence, or possibly by the caprice, of the monarch. His ministers were permitted to signify the intentions of their master in the various language which was best adapted to their respective principles; [7] and he artfully balanced the hopes and fears of his subjects, by publishing in the same

year two edicts; the first of which enjoined the solemn observance of Sunday, [8] and the second directed the regular consultation of the Aruspices. [9] While this important revolution yet remained in suspense, the Christians and the Pagans watched the conduct of their sovereign with the same anxiety, but with very opposite sentiments. The former were prompted by every motive of zeal, as well as vanity, to exaggerate the marks of his favor, and the evidences of his faith. The latter, till their just apprehensions were changed into despair and resentment, attempted to conceal from the world, and from themselves, that the gods of Rome could no longer reckon the emperor in the number of their votaries. The same passions and prejudices have engaged the partial writers of the times to connect the public profession of Christianity with the most glorious or the most ignominious aera of the reign of Constantine.

[Footnote 1: The date of the Divine Institutions of Lactantius has been accurately discussed, difficulties have been started, solutions proposed, and an expedient imagined of two original editions; the former published during the persecution of Diocletian, the latter under that of Licinius. See Dufresnoy, Prefat. p. v. Tillemont, Mem. Ecclesiast. tom. vi. p. 465-470. Lardner's Credibility, part ii. vol. vii. p. 78-86.

For my own part, I am almost convinced that Lactantius dedicated his Institutions to the sovereign of Gaul, at a time when Galerius, Maximin, and even Licinius, persecuted the Christians; that is, between the years 306 and 311.]

[Footnote 2: Lactant. *Divin. Institut.* i. 1. vii. 27. The first and most important of these passages is indeed wanting in twenty-eight manuscripts; but it is found in nineteen. If we weigh the comparative value of these manuscripts, one of 900 years old, in the king of France's library may be alleged in its favor; but the passage is omitted in the correct manuscript of Bologna, which the P. de Montfaucon ascribes to the sixth or seventh century (*Diarium Italic.* p. 489.) The taste of most of the editors (except Isaeus; see Lactant. edit. Dufresnoy, tom. i. p. 596) has felt the genuine style of Lactantius.]

[Footnote 3: Euseb. in *Vit. Constant.* 1. i. c. 27-32.]

[Footnote 4: Zosimus, 1. ii. p. 104.]

[Footnote 5: That rite was always used in making a catechumen, (see Bingham's *Antiquities.* 1. x. c. i. p. 419. Dom Chardon, *Hist. des Sacramens*, tom. i. p. 62,) and Constantine received it for the first time (Euseb. in *Vit Constant.* 1. iv. c. 61) immediately before his baptism and death. From the connection of these two facts, Valesius (*ad loc.* Euseb.) has drawn the conclusion which is reluctantly admitted by Tillemont, (*Hist. des Empereurs*, tom. iv. p. 628,) and opposed with feeble arguments by Mosheim, (p. 968.)]

[Footnote 6: Euseb. in *Vit. Constant.* 1. iv. c. 61, 62, 63. The legend of Constantine's baptism at Rome, thirteen years before his death, was invented in the eighth century, as a proper motive for his donation.

Such has been the gradual progress of knowledge, that a story, of which Cardinal Baronius (Annual Ecclesiast. A. D. 324, No. 43-49) declared himself the unblushing advocate, is now feebly supported, even within the verge of the Vatican. See the Antiquitates Christianae, tom. ii. p. 232; a work published with six approbations at Rome, in the year 1751 by Father Mamachi, a learned Dominican.]

[Footnote 7: The quaestor, or secretary, who composed the law of the Theodosian Code, makes his master say with indifference, "hominibus supradictae religionis," (l. xvi. tit. ii. leg. 1.) The minister of ecclesiastical affairs was allowed a more devout and respectful style, the legal, most holy, and Catholic worship.]

[Footnote 8: Cod. Theodos. l. ii. viii. tit. leg. 1. Cod. Justinian. l. iii. tit. xii. leg. 3. Constantine styles the Lord's day dies solis, a name which could not offend the ears of his pagan subjects.]

[Footnote 9: Cod. Theodos. l. xvi. tit. x. leg. 1. Godefroy, in the character of a commentator, endeavors (tom. vi. p. 257) to excuse Constantine; but the more zealous Baronius (Annal. Eccles. A. D. 321, No. 17) censures his profane conduct with truth and asperity.]

Whatever symptoms of Christian piety might transpire in the discourses or actions of Constantine, he persevered till he was near forty years of age in the practice of the established religion; [10] and the same conduct which in the court of Nicomedia might be imputed to his fear,

could be ascribed only to the inclination or policy of the sovereign of Gaul. His liberality restored and enriched the temples of the gods; the medals which issued from his Imperial mint are impressed with the figures and attributes of Jupiter and Apollo, of Mars and Hercules; and his filial piety increased the council of Olympus by the solemn apotheosis of his father Constantius. [11] But the devotion of Constantine was more peculiarly directed to the genius of the Sun, the Apollo of Greek and Roman mythology; and he was pleased to be represented with the symbols of the God of Light and Poetry. The unerring shafts of that deity, the brightness of his eyes, his laurel wreath, immortal beauty, and elegant accomplishments, seem to point him out as the patron of a young hero. The altars of Apollo were crowned with the votive offerings of Constantine; and the credulous multitude were taught to believe, that the emperor was permitted to behold with mortal eyes the visible majesty of their tutelar deity; and that, either walking or in a vision, he was blessed with the auspicious omens of a long and victorious reign. The Sun was universally celebrated as the invincible guide and protector of Constantine; and the Pagans might reasonably expect that the insulted god would pursue with unrelenting vengeance the impiety of his ungrateful favorite. [12]

[Footnote 10: Theodoret. (l. i. c. 18) seems to insinuate that Helena gave her son a Christian education; but we may be assured, from the superior authority of Eusebius, (in Vit. Constant. l. iii. c. 47,) that she herself was indebted to Constantine for the knowledge of Christianity.]

[Footnote 11: See the medals of Constantine in Ducange and Banduri. As few cities had retained the privilege of coining, almost all the medals of that age issued from the mint under the sanction of the Imperial authority.]

[Footnote 12: The panegyric of Eumenius, (vii. inter Panegyri. Vet.), which was pronounced a few months before the Italian war, abounds with the most unexceptionable evidence of the Pagan superstition of Constantine, and of his particular veneration for Apollo, or the Sun; to which Julian alludes.]

As long as Constantine exercised a limited sovereignty over the provinces of Gaul, his Christian subjects were protected by the authority, and perhaps by the laws, of a prince, who wisely left to the gods the care of vindicating their own honor. If we may credit the assertion of Constantine himself, he had been an indignant spectator of the savage cruelties which were inflicted, by the hands of Roman soldiers, on those citizens whose religion was their only crime. [13] In the East and in the West, he had seen the different effects of severity and indulgence; and as the former was rendered still more odious by the example of Galerius, his implacable enemy, the latter was recommended to his imitation by the authority and advice of a dying father. The son of Constantius immediately suspended or repealed the edicts of persecution, and granted the free exercise of their religious ceremonies to all those who had already professed themselves members of the church. They were

soon encouraged to depend on the favor as well as on the justice of their sovereign, who had imbibed a secret and sincere reverence for the name of Christ, and for the God of the Christians. [14]

[Footnote 13: Constantin. Orat. ad Sanctos, c. 25. But it might easily be shown, that the Greek translator has improved the sense of the Latin original; and the aged emperor might recollect the persecution of Diocletian with a more lively abhorrence than he had actually felt to the days of his youth and Paganism.]

[Footnote 14: See Euseb. Hist. Eccles. l. viii. 13, l. ix. 9, and in Vit. Const. l. i. c. 16, 17 Lactant. Divin. Institut. i. l. Caecilius de Mort. Persecut. c. 25.]

About five months after the conquest of Italy, the emperor made a solemn and authentic declaration of his sentiments by the celebrated edict of Milan, which restored peace to the Catholic church. In the personal interview of the two western princes, Constantine, by the ascendant of genius and power, obtained the ready concurrence of his colleague, Licinius; the union of their names and authority disarmed the fury of Maximin; and after the death of the tyrant of the East, the edict of Milan was received as a general and fundamental law of the Roman world.

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[Footnote 15: Caecilius (de Mort. Persecut. c. 48) has preserved the Latin original; and Eusebius (Hist. Eccles. l. x. c. 5) has given

a Greek translation of this perpetual edict, which refers to some provisional regulations.]

The wisdom of the emperors provided for the restitution of all the civil and religious rights of which the Christians had been so unjustly deprived. It was enacted that the places of worship, and public lands, which had been confiscated, should be restored to the church, without dispute, without delay, and without expense; and this severe injunction was accompanied with a gracious promise, that if any of the purchasers had paid a fair and adequate price, they should be indemnified from the Imperial treasury. The salutary regulations which guard the future tranquillity of the faithful are framed on the principles of enlarged and equal toleration; and such an equality must have been interpreted by a recent sect as an advantageous and honorable distinction. The two emperors proclaim to the world, that they have granted a free and absolute power to the Christians, and to all others, of following the religion which each individual thinks proper to prefer, to which he has addicted his mind, and which he may deem the best adapted to his own use. They carefully explain every ambiguous word, remove every exception, and exact from the governors of the provinces a strict obedience to the true and simple meaning of an edict, which was designed to establish and secure, without any limitation, the claims of religious liberty. They condescend to assign two weighty reasons which have induced them to allow this universal toleration: the humane intention of consulting the peace and happiness of their people; and the pious hope, that, by such a conduct, they shall appease and propitiate the Deity,

whose seat is in heaven. They gratefully acknowledge the many signal proofs which they have received of the divine favor; and they trust that the same Providence will forever continue to protect the prosperity of the prince and people. From these vague and indefinite expressions of piety, three suppositions may be deduced, of a different, but not of an incompatible nature. The mind of Constantine might fluctuate between the Pagan and the Christian religions. According to the loose and complying notions of Polytheism, he might acknowledge the God of the Christians as one of the many deities who compose the hierarchy of heaven. Or perhaps he might embrace the philosophic and pleasing idea, that, notwithstanding the variety of names, of rites, and of opinions, all the sects, and all the nations of mankind, are united in the worship of the common Father and Creator of the universe. [16]

[Footnote 16: A panegyric of Constantine, pronounced seven or eight months after the edict of Milan, (see Gothofred. Chronolog. Legum, p. 7, and Tillemont, Hist. des Empereurs, tom. iv. p. 246,) uses the following remarkable expression: "Summe rerum sator, cujus tot nomina sant, quot linguas gentium esse voluisti, quem enim te ipse dici velin, scire non possumus." (Panegy. Vet. ix. 26.) In explaining Constantine's progress in the faith, Mosheim (p. 971, &c.) is ingenious, subtle, prolix.]

But the counsels of princes are more frequently influenced by views of temporal advantage, than by considerations of abstract and speculative truth. The partial and increasing favor of Constantine may naturally be referred to the esteem which he entertained for the moral character of

the Christians; and to a persuasion, that the propagation of the gospel would inculcate the practice of private and public virtue. Whatever latitude an absolute monarch may assume in his own conduct, whatever indulgence he may claim for his own passions, it is undoubtedly his interest that all his subjects should respect the natural and civil obligations of society. But the operation of the wisest laws is imperfect and precarious. They seldom inspire virtue, they cannot always restrain vice. Their power is insufficient to prohibit all that they condemn, nor can they always punish the actions which they prohibit. The legislators of antiquity had summoned to their aid the powers of education and of opinion. But every principle which had once maintained the vigor and purity of Rome and Sparta, was long since extinguished in a declining and despotic empire. Philosophy still exercised her temperate sway over the human mind, but the cause of virtue derived very feeble support from the influence of the Pagan superstition. Under these discouraging circumstances, a prudent magistrate might observe with pleasure the progress of a religion which diffused among the people a pure, benevolent, and universal system of ethics, adapted to every duty and every condition of life; recommended as the will and reason of the supreme Deity, and enforced by the sanction of eternal rewards or punishments. The experience of Greek and Roman history could not inform the world how far the system of national manners might be reformed and improved by the precepts of a divine revelation; and Constantine might listen with some confidence to the flattering, and indeed reasonable, assurances of Lactantius. The eloquent apologist seemed firmly to expect, and almost ventured to promise, that the establishment of

Christianity would restore the innocence and felicity of the primitive age; that the worship of the true God would extinguish war and dissension among those who mutually considered themselves as the children of a common parent; that every impure desire, every angry or selfish passion, would be restrained by the knowledge of the gospel; and that the magistrates might sheath the sword of justice among a people who would be universally actuated by the sentiments of truth and piety, of equity and moderation, of harmony and universal love. [17]

[Footnote 17: See the elegant description of Lactantius, (*Divin Institut. v. 8.*) who is much more perspicuous and positive than becomes a discreet prophet.]

The passive and unresisting obedience, which bows under the yoke of authority, or even of oppression, must have appeared, in the eyes of an absolute monarch, the most conspicuous and useful of the evangelic virtues. [18] The primitive Christians derived the institution of civil government, not from the consent of the people, but from the decrees of Heaven. The reigning emperor, though he had usurped the sceptre by treason and murder, immediately assumed the sacred character of vicegerent of the Deity. To the Deity alone he was accountable for the abuse of his power; and his subjects were indissolubly bound, by their oath of fidelity, to a tyrant, who had violated every law of nature and society. The humble Christians were sent into the world as sheep among wolves; and since they were not permitted to employ force even in the defence of their religion, they should be still more criminal if they

were tempted to shed the blood of their fellow-creatures in disputing the vain privileges, or the sordid possessions, of this transitory life. Faithful to the doctrine of the apostle, who in the reign of Nero had preached the duty of unconditional submission, the Christians of the three first centuries preserved their conscience pure and innocent of the guilt of secret conspiracy, or open rebellion. While they experienced the rigor of persecution, they were never provoked either to meet their tyrants in the field, or indignantly to withdraw themselves into some remote and sequestered corner of the globe. [19] The Protestants of France, of Germany, and of Britain, who asserted with such intrepid courage their civil and religious freedom, have been insulted by the invidious comparison between the conduct of the primitive and of the reformed Christians. [20] Perhaps, instead of censure, some applause may be due to the superior sense and spirit of our ancestors, who had convinced themselves that religion cannot abolish the unalienable rights of human nature. [21] Perhaps the patience of the primitive church may be ascribed to its weakness, as well as to its virtue.

A sect of unwarlike plebeians, without leaders, without arms, without fortifications, must have encountered inevitable destruction in a rash and fruitless resistance to the master of the Roman legions. But the Christians, when they deprecated the wrath of Diocletian, or solicited the favor of Constantine, could allege, with truth and confidence, that they held the principle of passive obedience, and that, in the space of three centuries, their conduct had always been conformable to their

principles. They might add, that the throne of the emperors would be established on a fixed and permanent basis, if all their subjects, embracing the Christian doctrine, should learn to suffer and to obey.

[Footnote 18: The political system of the Christians is explained by Grotius, *de Jure Belli et Pacis*, l. i. c. 3, 4. Grotius was a republican and an exile, but the mildness of his temper inclined him to support the established powers.]

[Footnote 19: Tertullian. *Apolog.* c. 32, 34, 35, 36. *Tamen nunquam Albiniani, nec Nigriani vel Cassiani inveniri potuerunt Christiani. Ad Scapulam*, c. 2. If this assertion be strictly true, it excludes the Christians of that age from all civil and military employments, which would have compelled them to take an active part in the service of their respective governors. See Moyle's Works, vol. ii. p. 349.]

[Footnote 20: See the artful Bossuet, (*Hist. des Variations des Eglises Protestantes*, tom. iii. p. 210-258.) and the malicious Bayle, (tom ii. p. 820.) I name Bayle, for he was certainly the author of the *Avis aux Refugies*; consult the *Dictionnaire Critique de Chauffepie*, tom. i. part ii. p. 145.]

[Footnote 21: Buchanan is the earliest, or at least the most celebrated, of the reformers, who has justified the theory of resistance. See his *Dialogue de Jure Regni apud Scotos*, tom. ii. p. 28, 30, edit. fol. Rudiman.]

In the general order of Providence, princes and tyrants are considered as the ministers of Heaven, appointed to rule or to chastise the nations of the earth. But sacred history affords many illustrious examples of the more immediate interposition of the Deity in the government of his chosen people. The sceptre and the sword were committed to the hands of Moses, of Joshua, of Gideon, of David, of the Maccabees; the virtues of those heroes were the motive or the effect of the divine favor, the success of their arms was destined to achieve the deliverance or the triumph of the church. If the judges of Israel were occasional and temporary magistrates, the kings of Judah derived from the royal unction of their great ancestor an hereditary and indefeasible right, which could not be forfeited by their own vices, nor recalled by the caprice of their subjects. The same extraordinary providence, which was no longer confined to the Jewish people, might elect Constantine and his family as the protectors of the Christian world; and the devout Lactantius announces, in a prophetic tone, the future glories of his long and universal reign. [22] Galerius and Maximin, Maxentius and Licinius, were the rivals who shared with the favorite of heaven the provinces of the empire. The tragic deaths of Galerius and Maximin soon gratified the resentment, and fulfilled the sanguine expectations, of the Christians. The success of Constantine against Maxentius and Licinius removed the two formidable competitors who still opposed the triumph of the second David, and his cause might seem to claim the peculiar interposition of Providence. The character of the Roman tyrant disgraced the purple and human nature; and though the Christians might

enjoy his precarious favor, they were exposed, with the rest of his subjects, to the effects of his wanton and capricious cruelty. The conduct of Licinius soon betrayed the reluctance with which he had consented to the wise and humane regulations of the edict of Milan. The convocation of provincial synods was prohibited in his dominions; his Christian officers were ignominiously dismissed; and if he avoided the guilt, or rather danger, of a general persecution, his partial oppressions were rendered still more odious by the violation of a solemn and voluntary engagement. [23] While the East, according to the lively expression of Eusebius, was involved in the shades of infernal darkness, the auspicious rays of celestial light warmed and illuminated the provinces of the West. The piety of Constantine was admitted as an unexceptionable proof of the justice of his arms; and his use of victory confirmed the opinion of the Christians, that their hero was inspired, and conducted, by the Lord of Hosts. The conquest of Italy produced a general edict of toleration; and as soon as the defeat of Licinius had invested Constantine with the sole dominion of the Roman world, he immediately, by circular letters, exhorted all his subjects to imitate, without delay, the example of their sovereign, and to embrace the divine truth of Christianity. [24]

[Footnote 22: Lactant Divin. Institut. i. l. Eusebius in the course of his history, his life, and his oration, repeatedly inculcates the divine right of Constantine to the empire.]

[Footnote 23: Our imperfect knowledge of the persecution of Licinius

is derived from Eusebius, (Hist. 1. x. c. 8. Vit. Constantin. 1. i. c. 49-56, 1. ii. c. 1, 2.) Aurelius Victor mentions his cruelty in general terms.]

[Footnote 24: Euseb. in Vit. Constant. 1. ii. c. 24-42 48-60.]