

## History is His Story

People often say politics and the church should not mix but often there is no choice of involvement. It is often thought that **when Rome turned Christian**, Constantine just issued a decree and that was that. Not true. There are lessons for us.

Constantine the Great won an epic battle having seen a vision of the Chi-Rho cross and was told to conquer in its image. He had his soldiers paint the chi-rho on their shields and he crossed the Rubicon and won the empire. His mother was a Christian, but he was a soldier and administrator. Theology was not his thing. So he called a church council at Nicea, 315 AD, to define the faith. There, the orthodox or ancient Christian beliefs in the Triune God (championed by Athanasius) overrode Arius and Arianism, a heresy that believed Jesus was God's Son but only a superior being, not divine or coeternal with God. (Trinity doctrine says that the Son and Holy Spirit are "consubstantial" with the Father, loosely meaning, "with Him and equal to Him at the beginning".)

But Arianism didn't die out. Constantine conferred with Arius after he had banished him. He could find no heresy, and recommended his restoration. Well, you can't refuse the Emperor, but on the way to attend mass, Arius died a horrible death where his bowels prolapsed and spilled out. Constantine then wondered if Arius was indeed a heretic after all. When the Emperor died, 335, he was baptized by Eusebius of Nicomedia, an Arian follower. Arianism continued beyond Roman boundaries until the 600's.

Constantine had done a good thing in summoning the Council of Nicea which canonized scripture and adopted our creeds. But the emperor had a succession problem and anticipated civil war between rival sons. So he gave each of his 3 sons parts of the empire and 2 cousins as well. Civil war erupted, his sons and relatives killed one another until Constantius only remained. Constantius took theology more seriously and adopted Arianism, using puppet church councils to banish Athanasius and ban the Nicene Creed. Five times Athanasius fled his see, often in peril of his life, wandering in alien lands for 50 years while patiently persuading wherever he could. The Roman "pope" archbishop agreed with Athanasius, but Eastern bishops remained in the sway of the Emperor. Now while all this was happening, paganism still commanded a diminishing 50% of the empire's loyalty. It took many forms, chief among which was Neoplatonism. 3 years before Constantine died, a nephew, Julian, was born. His father and brothers were all assassinated in the succession wars and little Julian was sent to Cappadocia, where his Christian teachers were dour and doctrinal. But nearby were also banished pagan philosophers with witty, entertaining ideas and Julian secretly converted to paganism. By age 23 he was clever enough to hide his faith views. Summoned by Constantius, he passed muster but was thought to be merely a philosopher by nature. He was sent to Athens, a bastion of philosophy but also paganism. He was summoned again when his brother Gallus proved to be a tyrant and was beheaded. To his surprise Julian, a shy, celibate thinker was given administrative duties over Gaul (Celtic forerunner of France). Gaul was in trouble. Those dirty, dastardly, barefoot barbarian Germans had taken advantage of civil war and crossed the Rhine to seize territory. Julian, now forced to quickly study how to be a general, routed the German Alemanni and the related tribe called Franks. They were pushed back over the Rhine River. He then commenced to apply and interpret Roman law in a wise, learned way. We owe the principle of "innocent until proven guilty" to Julian. In 361, Constantius died and Julian, the secret pagan, became emperor. He restored the pagan temples and favored their philosophers. It was an ugly time for many Christians. But the foot soldiers had found a blessed assurance in death of a Savior in the Christian faith. They named a Christian to succeed Julian when he fell in battle with the Persians, 363 AD, just 2 years after his ascension to the throne. And yet the war between Christian rulers and pagan ones would go on and on until Theodosius quashed a pagan rebellion in 394. Athanasius was restored. But the war of faiths broke the political unity and morale of the Western Roman Empire, (perhaps like partisanship split democrats and monarchists in 1917 Russia or America's present partisanship) soon to be overrun by barbarians.

Faith is not just doctrine and scholarship but a walk with God, a wild ride, and a wrestling struggle like Jacob knew. If a church abandons itself exclusively to doctrine, it shouldn't be surprised if its children follow pop culture instead, like Julian. Yet we are called to defend the true faith, stand in the gap, like Athanasius. 22 years after Julian's death, the Roman Emperor Valens lost the battle and half the Roman army at Adrianople, one of the great turning points of history. From that point forward, the wealthy western empire collapsed rapidly, and being a Christian became a life of oftentimes struggles and terror. That's when you need Jesus the most.