

April 9th

When politicians talk too long about “unity,” people often sense that they really mean, “my way or the highway.” That was the case with Nazis, Mussolini and Stalin. It was also the theme of Roman Emperor **Diocletian** who succeeded to the throne in 284. Rome’s republic had originally established two rulers, *proconsuls*, hundreds of years before. We think this was due to distrust of the Etruscan kings who first ruled them. Having twin kings was a check-and-balance system but Julius Caesar, in 49BC, assumed both offices, and every emperor thereafter was a singular monarch for life. Diocletian saw that the empire had grown so large that it spawned rival generals each with an army to aspire to be emperors. That led to a hundred years of emperors who usually presided for a few years and were usually assassinated. So he decided to split the empire into an east and west realm, each ruled by an *augusti*, or senior emperor and two junior emperors called *caesares*. He and Maximian would be Augusti, while Galerius and Constantius Chlorus would be Caesares. All were Diocletian’s trusted men. Management of the empire improved and Diocletian was hailed for his great organizational skills.

Christianity had increased to at least 10% of the population. Rumors that Diocletian’s wife, Prisca, and daughter, Valeria, were believers encouraged Christians everywhere. The first 15 years of this new system was fairly good for church growth and numbers swelled to over 20% of population. But then Diocletian decided that Religious Unity would strengthen the empire in 299. That meant Roman religion alone. He issued edicts that would guarantee the supremacy of the old state religion of Rome in 301. Life became more difficult for Christians. Then Diocletian decided that Christian faith needed to be eliminated. On Feb. 23, 303, on a Roman feast day, he issued a decree that all copies of Scripture would be burned, all Christian properties confiscated, and all churches destroyed. Meetings of Christian worship were forbidden. Christians who resisted would be stripped of all legal titles. The **Great Persecution** began.

Priests were arrested along with prominent Christians. This overcrowded prisons. The real criminals were let out of prison and they began to cause havoc with the markets and business. Diocletian decided to offer that if a person would make sacrifice to a Roman god, they would be freed. Prison guards tried tricks to get prisoners to spill a little water symbolizing that they poured out libations to the Roman gods. In 304, another edict demanded all people in the empire do Roman sacrifices. The Augusti became extremely unpopular and this led to Diocletian and Maximian abdicating in 305 to Constantius and Galerius. Constantius in the West was not interested in enforcing the edicts. Galerius, however, kept them up until 311, becoming as unpopular as Diocletian had been. On his death bed he relented, issuing a final edict of limited toleration if Christians didn’t disturb the peace.

Constantius had a concubine, Helena, who bore a son, Constantine. Upon his father’s death, Britain in 312, the troops proclaimed Constantine emperor, but he had a rival. Maxentius was proclaimed emperor by the Praetorian Guard in Rome. The stage was set for a standoff as Constantine marched south into Italy. Just five miles from Rome, the night before the battle, Constantine had a dream in which it was written across the sky, “In this sign conquer.” The sign

was the Chi-Rho, the first two letters of Christ. When Constantine ordered soldiers to paint this sign on their shields, he discovered that almost half of his troops were closet Christians. Christ's death and resurrection was a much surer hope for a soldier who faced death every day than Rome's bickering gods. With the Chi-Rho on their shields, they fought like lions. Constantine won and went on to defeat Licinius, emperor of the East, to re-unite the empire. In 315, he gave the edict of Milan which granted religious equality for all Christians. Again, Christians began to come out of the woodwork – 36 million of the 90 million in the empire. Faith had conquered authoritarian unity.