

Constantine and the Church

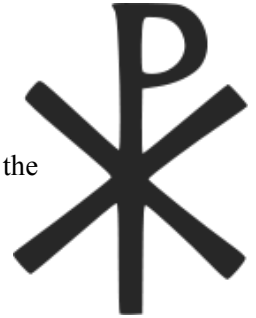
Directions: Read and annotate the documents below, and answer the questions that follow.

Conversion of Constantine and the Edict of Milan

“[In the vision, Constantine was told that] if he went forward in the battle in the name of Christ, he would win. He did, he won, he became the sole emperor of the Empire, and Christianity had its day finally...”

Source: Dr. Karen Hersch PhD, Temple University

Emperor **Constantine** came to power at a time of disorder in which leadership of Rome had been divided between four emperors who were battling each other for power. Constantine, one of the four, was determined to become the Emperor of all Rome. Before leading his troops against the rival Emperor at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, Constantine claimed to have had a miraculous vision. In the sky, he saw the Christian symbol known as the “**Chi Rho**,” the letters XP in Greek, which represent the word Christ. He also heard a voice saying “*In hoc signo vinces*” or “In this sign you will conquer.” He instructed his men to paint the Chi Rho on their shields, and after they won the battle, Constantine was convinced of the truth of Christianity and converted to the faith. In 313 CE, Constantine passed the **Edict of Milan**, a ruling that allowed all Romans, including Christians, to worship in whatever way they wanted in order to respect all religions and keep peace in the Empire. This freedom allowed Christianity to grow and spread further and faster, especially with the support of the Emperor himself. In fact, within less than a century, the Roman Emperor Theodosius would make Christianity the official state religion of the Roman Empire.



“Whatever degree of power and influence Christians had when Constantine came to power, Constantine’s conversion to Christianity had a major effect. We find that Christians are being put in positions of higher power. He also provided tax exemptions for members of the clergy [and] he gave enormous amounts of land to the church...”

Source: Prof. Myles McDonnell, CUNY Baruch College

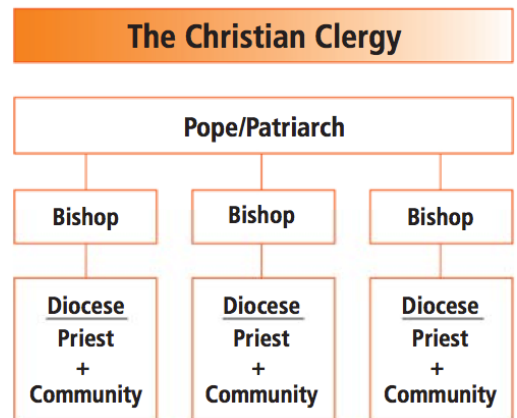
Church Hierarchy

“Really in the 3rd Century you see all these prominent characters rising to these positions of power within the church, which is very significant because it means that Christianity is also attractive to members of the aristocracy and not just the humble and meek, not just carpenters, shepherds, fishermen, slaves, women, but also [leaders] in Roman society.”

Source: Dr. Alexander Evers, Loyola University of Chicago

The early Church lacked an organized structure of **clergy**, or people who hold positions in the Church. Most early communities met in house churches, often run by women out of their own homes. Over time, however, as Christianity grew and more aristocrats joined the faith, a hierarchical system of leadership developed. Local communities had **priests** who carried our religious ceremonies, and many cities had **bishops** who oversaw the priests.

“Bishops, you can compare them to the magistrates of a city. Priests are [like] the senators of the city, And then there are the people. So the pyramid of power that you see in secular (non-religious) life is copied onto the Church. Important bishops... really make that difference in establishing that hierarchy. The larger they’re followings the more powerful they become.”



Source: Dr. Alexander Evers, Loyola University of Chicago

Eventually, the bishops of Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem were given the special status of **Patriarchs**, and oversaw the bishops in their region. The Bishop of Rome eventually claimed superiority over all the Patriarchs, calling himself the **Pope**. The other Patriarchs did not recognize his superiority, but in the West many did.

The Council of Nicaea, the Trinity, and Heresy

“[The early Bible] would have circulated as any number of books in any number of forms, because Christianity was an immensely diverse faith from the eastern Mediterranean and into the West.”

Source: Dr Paul Stevenson, Durham University

For the first centuries of Christianity, there was no **Orthodox** (correct, official) version of Christian beliefs. While all Christians believed in the teachings of Jesus and had some similar practices, different groups of Christians had very different ideas about basic beliefs, especially the nature of Jesus Christ. As the Church became more organized, this became an issue of conflict between church leaders.

“There was a huge problem with how exactly was Jesus related to God. If you said he was divine and human, what did you mean? Was it like the god appearing in human flesh but not a real body? Were you saying he was half and half? That was really the question that was going to be debated.”

Source: John Dominic Crossan, Christian Theologian and former Catholic Priest

Constantine hoped to see Christianity become a unifying force for the Roman Empire, so he saw these arguments as a threat to Christianity and to the Empire itself. In 325 CE, Constantine called a council of bishops and leaders in the Church to meet in Nicaea in Asia Minor in order to come to an agreement on Christian belief. Despite the many different views that existed, the bishops in attendance took a vote to decide on one official belief of the Church. The result was the **Nicene Creed**, a declaration of faith that presented a view that Jesus Christ was equal to God and part of God. This was explained through the concept of the **Trinity**, One God in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

“We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible; And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten (born) from the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father... through Whom all things came into being... Who because of us men and because of our salvation came down, and... became man, and suffered, and rose again on the third day, and ascended (went up) to the heavens, and will come to judge the living and dead; And in the Holy Spirit...”

—Nicene Creed (325)



“The church became efficient, it became centralized, it met on occasions, difficult questions were answered, and the force of the state was brought to bear to ensure that decisions taken were enforced universally.”

Source: Dr Paul Stevenson, Durham University

As Orthodoxy became more strictly defined by the **Council of Nicaea** and further Church councils, those with beliefs different from the “Orthodox” view were labeled as **Heretics**, those who follow a **Heresy**, or false belief, and they were persecuted for their beliefs. Below is a list of some early alternative beliefs labeled heresies.

Adoptionists	Believed that Jesus was born as a mere (non-divine) man, was a supremely virtuous person and that God later symbolically adopted Jesus as "Son of God."
Arianists	Denied the divinity of Jesus, believing that he was created by God, that he had a beginning in time, and that the title "Son of God" was symbolic not literal. Popular among Germanic tribes.
Docetists	Believed that Jesus' physical body was an illusion, as was his crucifixion, and that Jesus only seemed to have a physical body and to physically die, but in reality he was a non-physical pure spirit, and hence could not physically die.
Ebionites	Believed that followers of Jesus must follow the Jewish Law of the Torah and believed Jesus was the Messiah but not divine. They were considered a sect of Judaism.
Gnostics	Believed that the material world was evil and that only the spiritual world was good, that the God of the Old Testament was an evil god who created the material world and that Jesus was sent to teach special knowledge, or <i>gnosis</i> , that would allow people to reach the spiritual world.
Pneumatomachians	Believed that Jesus was divine, and part of God, but refused to accept the Holy Spirit as divine. Their name means “Spirit Fighters.”