

Constantine by Leo Rosten

¹SIX DIFFERENT CAESARS contested within Rome's great empire. Their legions fought invading Franks, rebellious Gauls, the Persians—and each other. At stake was more than glory, for from Spain to the borders of India stretched the land, riches, soldiers, slaves, crops, mines and taxes of the mightiest empire on earth.

²Behind the marching columns and the cynical intrigues, a moral order was crumbling. The pagan gods—ancient Roman deities, Byzantium's sun gods, bizarre oriental divinities—were losing their hold on men's faith. In a welter of oracles, mysteries and occult creeds, superstitions clashed and religious passions took odd forms. A new sect of "fanatics" held that one Jesus of Nazareth, whom a Roman governor had executed three centuries before, was the Christ (Messiah) and that eternal salvation awaited all who accepted Him. These peculiar "Christians" would worship no god but their own; worse, they denied that other gods even existed. The voluptuary and contemptuous Romans confiscated their possessions, flogged them, fed them to wild beasts, beheaded and crucified them by the score.

³One of the six Caesars, Constantine, illegitimate son of Constantius Augustus, a noble Roman general had spent his youth in the nomadic court of Diocletian, a sort of hostage to insure his father's loyalty. He had proved his valor on battlefields in Persia and Egypt. He was 32 before he could join his father in Britain, and when Constantius died, in 306, the troops acclaimed Constantine their Caesar.

⁴In campaigns from Marseilles to the Rhine, he won brilliant victories against the enemies of Rome and over rival proconsuls, then marched his battalions across the Alps and down the verdant

Italian valleys—toward Rome. On October 28, 312, Constantine confronted Maxentius (whom the Praetorian guard had hailed emperor) at Saxa Ruhra, nine miles north of the capital. Maxentius was widely feared as a master of sorcery, so Constantine prayed for supernatural aid—perhaps to the Divine Being whom, rumor had it, his father had secretly worshiped. And his prayers were answered by a miracle, said Constantine: A luminous cross appeared in the sky, with the words *In hoc signo vinces* (Under this sign, thou shalt conquer") and this symbol: ☩, the intertwined Greek letters Chi (X) and Rho (P), the first two letters in "Christos." Constantine painted the symbol on his helmet and his soldiers' shields, stormed into battle, drove Maxentius and his army into the Tiber, then marched into Rome in triumph—behind the *labarum*, a great purple banner with ☩ and a cross emblazoned on it. A Caesar—nay, Caesar Augustus—had adopted the sign of Christ! Who could have foreseen the measureless leverage, on all of history, of this one gesture?

⁵Constantine now reigned supreme in the West; Licinius, coequal Caesar, in the East. Together, they issued the Edict of Milan, an unprecedented pronouncement that granted freedom to all religions. But in 323, after Licinius began persecuting Christians, Constantine marched into Thrace. At Adrianople and Chrysopolis, he destroyed his last rival to become uncontested emperor.

⁶Now, for the first time, Constantine publicly declared himself a Christian. But he would not be baptized and, in private life, showed small regard for Christian worship. He surrounded himself with pagan philosophers and, when some epidemic threatened or the crop forecast appeared poor, did not hesitate to enlist

pagan deities in rites of propitiation. Was his conversion a true act of faith? Or was it a shrewd maneuver to win Christian support? No one knows. Perhaps it was a bit of both—to invest him with spiritual, as well as secular, sanctions.

⁷Constantine was astute enough to see that the Christians were troublemakers only if their faith was opposed. Their bishops taught them to render unto Caesar that which was Caesar's; they accepted the divine right of kings. Besides, the young Church was an administrative hierarchy that could be used for political ends. Constantine made the bishops his allies; he gave them the authority of judges; he restored the properties of Christians and the privileges of their confessors; he exempted the churches from taxation; he even banned pagan images from the city he named *Nova Roma*, but which men called after him, Constantinople.

⁸Constantine would summon the bishops into ecclesiastical councils over which he presided himself, hammering away at them to end their dissensions. He always supported the majority. He called the first ecumenical (universal) conference at Nicaea, in 325, in an effort to resolve the controversy over Arius, who held Christ to be inferior to God. Constantine forced 318 bishops (even Pope Sylvester I sent a nuncio) to agree on one central statement about the Son of God {"begotten...not made, being of one essence with the Father"}, to which the orthodox would thereafter adhere.

⁹If the sincerity of Constantine's faith can be questioned, his mother's cannot. Helena had made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, where she razed a pagan temple that had been erected over the tomb of Jesus. There, she said, were the true Cross, two nails and the Holy Sepulchre. Constantine built a church on the very spot.

¹⁰He was a bold general, a relentless organizer, poorly educated, single-minded, driven by an instinct for the political, generous, ruthless, given to impulsive action. He killed three members of his own family, for real or rumored wrongs: Crispus, a son; his second wife, Fausta, who had borne him six children; and a nephew. He depleted his treasuries again and again to build monuments to his vanity: triumphal arches, great basilicas, churches.

¹¹In 337, the thirtieth year of his reign, he asked, at long last, for the sacrament of baptism. He removed the royal purple and donned the simple white of a Christian novice—in which he died. In Asia Minor and Greece, the faithful venerated him and Helena as saints, and in time the Eastern Church recognized them as such.

¹²Few men so changed history. The first Christian Caesar, Constantine lifted a harassed, despised faith onto the throne of imperial power. He made Christianity the state religion. He imposed a new morality upon a decaying pagan society: that Judaic-Christian ethic that would proliferate a civilization around the globe. His capital, so boldly moved from Rome to the Bosphorus, the very gateway to the East, preserved Roman law and Greek thought, to be revived after the Moslem conquests. Had he not adopted Christianity, says Professor Hugh Trevor-Roper of Oxford, "Europe might well have accepted some other oriental religion." Constantine the Great, on the brink of the Middle Ages, transformed the empire that would in time place a monumental adjective before "Roman": Holy.

—LEO ROSTEN

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