

Title Four: The Church's Story - The Beginnings

Part Five: The Christian Empire

Focus:

Christianity became the favoured religion in the Roman Empire when the Emperor Constantine became a Christian. Being the official state religion brought Christianity both advantages and disadvantages.

Words to Understand

Chi Rho - Greek monogram for Christ

Edict - document of agreement

A Sign in the Sky

The Milvian Bridge still stands in Rome over the muddy Tiber River. Here a battle took place that would be a turning point in the story of Christianity and the history of Europe.

It was October 312 CE. Constantine and his troops marched towards Rome to do battle with his opponent, Maxentius. It was the greatest challenge the gifted young general would ever face. The outcome would decide who would control the mighty Roman Empire.

As Constantine stopped to plan the battle, he realized he needed greater power than just military force. Maxentius was relying on the Roman gods. But how should Constantine pray? Constantine saw that the pagan gods didn't protect their worshippers. So he turned in prayer to the Christian God. As he prayed, Constantine had a vision. In the sky he saw a glowing cross and the words, *In hoc signo vinces* - "In this sign you will conquer".

Constantine and his whole army were amazed. That night in a dream it was confirmed: this was Jesus Christ he was dealing with.

Constantine accepted the vision. He adopted the sign. He had Christ's monogram, the Chi Rho, marked on his soldiers' armour. He went into battle. Even though his forces were outnumbered, he won.

Constantine believed that the God of the Christians had directed the battle to give him victory. Even though he was not baptised until the time of his death in 337, from that time on Constantine regarded himself as a Christian.

As a result of Constantine's conversion, in 313 he and the Eastern Roman Emperor, Licinius, issued a policy known as the Edict of Milan. This guaranteed complete freedom of religion to all in the Empire, including Christians. Under a later Emperor, Theodosius, Christianity was made the official religion of the Empire.

The Church spread more rapidly than it ever had before. But success brought its own problems. As it was made easier for people with pagan pasts to become members of the Church it became popular, even fashionable, to be Christian.

Constantine's decision to become a Christian provided privileges and benefits that have blessed the Church down to our own day. But it also brought many temptations and challenges. Sadly, the Church, which had experienced persecution, did not always use its worldly power well.

Task Eighteen

Printable Activity: Constantine

The following events, leading up to Constantine becoming a Christian, are in the wrong order. Arrange them in the correct order and illustrate them on the storyboard on the next page. One of them has been done for you.

- Constantine went into battle, even though his army was outnumbered, and won. From then on he regarded himself as a Christian.
- This battle between Constantine and Maxentius would decide who controlled the Roman Empire.
- In the sky Constantine saw a vision, a glowing cross and the words - *In this sign you will conquer*.
- In 312 AD at the Milvian Bridge over the Tiber River in Rome two mighty armies gathered to do battle.
- Constantine was amazed. He adopted Christ's sign, the Chi-Rho, and painted it on his soldiers' shields.
- Maxentius prayed to the Roman gods for help but Constantine turned instead to the God of the Christians.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5. Constantine was amazed. He adopted Christ's sign, Chi-Rho, and painted it on his soldier's shields.

6.

Task Nineteen

Ever since the 4th century people have argued whether becoming an official religion was good or bad for Christianity. Go through the following points and decide which are positive and which are negative aspects of Christianity becoming the official religion.

- The Church is able to spread the Good News more quickly.
- Many people join the Church for personal gain, not faith.
- Superstitious practices are brought into the Church by quick conversions.
- The Church loses its independence and can not criticize the government easily.
- The centralised government of the Empire helps keep the unity of the Church.
- Roman ways of organisation such as dividing areas into dioceses headed by bishops help the Church govern itself better.
- Christians have to fight in wars to defend the Empire.
- As large numbers of pagans became Christians, aspects of their worship are introduced into Christian practice, e.g. the use of candles, incense and genuflection.