

THE EDICT OF CONSTANTINE

THE LIBERTY OF THE CHURCH

The Pastoral Letters of the Bishops of Newport and Salford both deal with that epoch-making event—the publication of the famous Edict of Milan, issued by Constantine the Great in March, 313.

It is probably no exaggeration to say (says the Bishop of Salford in his Lenten Pastoral) that, after the Day of Pentecost, on which the Holy Ghost came down upon the first followers of Christ and so definitely founded the Church, no day in the whole of that Church's history has been of such vital moment and far-reaching consequences as the memorable day of the Edict of Milan. If the Day of Pentecost gave to the Church her birth as an organised body, the day of Constantine's Edict gave to her for the first time that liberty of life and action which alone made possible her complete development and her expansion throughout the whole world, as foretold by her Divine Founder. The anniversary, therefore, of the Edict of Milan is the anniversary of the Liberty of the Church.

In the year preceding this great act, on October 28, 312, the Emperor Constantine had gained, under the aegis of the Cross of Christ, made known to him in a miraculous vision but shortly before, his crushing victory over the tyrant and persecutor Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge over the Tiber, outside the walls of Rome. By this divinely granted triumph Constantine became the undisputed master of the Empire, and, though not yet a Christian, found the way open to secure for ever the emancipation of the Faith of Christ—the faith of his saintly mother, Helena, whom we in this country like to think of as of British blood and a native of the chief Roman city of this island. It was only natural, then, that the Holy Father should desire to inaugurate this Constantinian Centenary by the erection on the very battlefield of the Milvian Bridge of a new and splendid Basilica of the Holy Cross, the foundation stone of which was laid in his Holiness's name last October, about the date of the anniversary of the victory.

There exists, we imagine, a very general but erroneous idea that Constantine, in consequence of his victory under the Sign of the Cross, suddenly overturned the existing order of things, deposed paganism from its pride of place, and in its stead set up the Faith of Jesus Christ as the religion of Rome and of the Roman Empire. This was, however, very far from being the case. What Constantine's famous Edict did was to set the Church free from her fetters, to abolish the possibilities of her further persecution, and to leave her full liberty for her natural development.

Readers of Grisar's great History of Rome and the Popes, as well as of a recent excellent historical novel by an able Catholic writer, will have realised vividly the fact that for a very considerable period the conversion of Constantine did not, at least outwardly, make much difference in the predominant position of paganism in Rome. There was no violent closing of temples, no suppression of the prevailing cult of the heathen deities, no official substitution of Christian for pagan religious authorities, enacted or accomplished by Constantine. Those pagan temples still remained open and in use; the sacrifices to the deities were offered as of old; pagan priests and pontiffs, augurs and soothsayers, practised their professions; the Vestal Virgins lived on in their strange community as of yore.

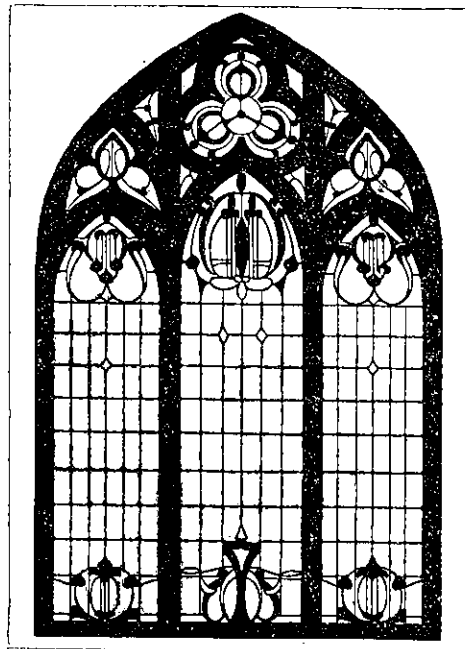
What really did happen was this. The Christian Faith, now secure from the bloody persecutions which for three centuries had endeavored to destroy her very existence, and at liberty to profess and practise openly her worship, to teach and preach the Divine Truths committed to her charge, became irresistibly a most powerful leaven in the body of the Roman Empire, which eventually led to the natural death of paganism and the complete victory of Christ.

After giving the principal operative portions of the Edict of Constantine, and quoting from Professor Nögarä a passage relating to the disintegration of paganism the Bishop of Salford proceeds:—

'The mere liberty of equality granted by Constantine inevitably led to the complete downfall of the pagan system, and the eventual triumph of Christianity. . . . In the . . . regeneration of the Empire by Christianity, there was one interlude, constituting for a short time a set-back in the development of the Church. This was the episode of the reign of the Emperor Julian the Apostate. Julian, a fanatic adherent of the old paganism and a bitter hater of Christianity, inaugurated a whole system for the rehabilitation of the former and the gradual suppression of the latter. This he endeavored to do by an attempt to elevate the pagan system, by the introduction of the best features of Christianity into the pagan cult. . . . On the other hand, although he revived to a certain degree the persecution, even to blood, of Christians, yet on the whole he had recourse to artifice rather than to open violence for damaging the Christian religion. One of the principal means he employed for this purpose was to deprive the Christian youth of the benefits of education—not, as the modern enemies of the Church, by eliminating the teaching of Christian doctrine from the schools, but by the insidious method of excluding Christian children from the benefits of secular education. The whole of this ingenious and deliberate attempt to cripple the Christian Church we may designate as the system of "Julianism"; and but for the action of Divine Providence in bringing about within a very few years the defeat and death of the apostate in a war with the Persians, this treacherous and subtle system might have had most fatal consequences for the Church at that date. The world has seen revivals of "Julianism" at several successive epochs since that time.'

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