

CHRISTIAN HISTORY 101

SESSION THREE: The Rise of Rome

- The Church: A Constantinian Coup
- Rome: Ruin and Replacement
- Traditions: Pagan Partnerships

I. THE CHURCH: A CONSTANTINIAN COUP

Coup: “A sudden, illegitimate seizure of power; a takeover; an unexpected but successful move.”

Constantine: Referred to as “Constantine the Great,” (272-337). Roman Emperor who was the first to convert to Christianity. Issued the “Edict of Milan,” allowed the Council of Nicaea, and moved the capital of the Empire to Byzantium, later renamed Constantinople (now Istanbul).

Battle of the Milvian Bridge: A battle between Constantine and his political rivals in 312 AD. Constantine claims to have had a vision of a cross shining in the sun and heard the words, “In this sign you shall conquer,” the sign being the “Chi-Rho,” an ancient symbol of Jesus. It was placed on Constantine’s shields.



The Edict of Milan: Issued in 313 AD, recognized Christianity as a legal religion throughout the Roman Empire. Constantine was not baptized until his deathbed.

Helena: British mother of Constantine, she was a devout Christian. Through her relationship with her son and church leaders, she saw the building of five major churches at holy sites: 1) The Basilica of St. Peter in Rome; 2) The Church of the Ascension (Mt of Olives); 3) The Church of the Nativity (Bethlehem); The Church of the Annunciation (Nazareth); and 5) The Church of the Holy Sepulcher (Jerusalem).

The “Constantinian Shift:” The point at which the Christian faith became a tool of the empire to expand its borders, maintain its identity, and reinforce it’s nationalistic agenda. In a word, “Christendom,” the fusion of Christianity with the State.

Theodosius I: The last Emperor of the united Roman Empire (347-395) as it split into East and West upon his death. In 380 he issued the “Edict of Thessalonica,” which made Christianity the “official religion” of the Roman Empire. In 392 he outlawed all competing religions and first “heretics” began to be marginalized, removed from office, and/or executed.

II. ROME: RUIN AND REPLACEMENT

Territory: Roman expansion was at its peak in 117 AD, with more than 5 million square miles of territory (about the size of Russia today). These borders held, more or less, until the early 300s.



Christianity’s Role: In a divided, multi-cultural, expansive Empire, “official Christianity” was an effort to hold political and military power together and maintain Roman identity.

Decline (West):

- 305 - 375, constant barbarian raiding on the edges
- 376, loss of the Balkans
- 383 - 395, civil war and splitting of East and West (395)
- 395 - 443, renewed barbarian raids from Germany, loss of Britain, Spain, France, and Africa
- 444 - 476, The Huns, Vandals, Visigoths, Goths, Franks, Celts
- 476, last Roman Emperor deposed by Germanic army

Power Vacuum: The Roman Church fills and expands the space left by the Roman Emperors in their 200 year decline. The leaders in politically important cities became leaders in the church with Rome holding the most important seat. By the time of Theodosius, the “Bishop of Rome” was the most powerful churchman in the world by using the wealth, esteem, and centralization of Rome; and the favor of the Emperor.

Key Early Popes: Pope Stephan I (c. 250) was first Roman Bishop to declare Roman supremacy. Leo I (400 - 461) negotiated the salvation of Rome with Attila the Hun, and was declared by the Emperor to be first among all Bishops based on succession and location. Pope Gregory I (590 - 604) was the civil governor of Rome and who best defined Papal supremacy.

III. TRADITIONS: PAGAN PARTNERSHIPS

A great many “Christian” practices and traditions are adaptations from the “pagan” and tribal cultures of the Roman world:

The names of the days of the week and months of the year.

Holidays: Halloween, Christmas, Lent, Easter.

Church Buildings: Cathedrals, steeples, icons.

Practices: Wedding rings, “formal” worship, vestments, day of worship, “Sunday best” dress.

Sacraments: The Eucharist and sacramental table, use of holy water, elevation of Mary

Theology: A “Platonic” heaven and dualistic thinking.

Structure:	Roman Empire	Roman Catholicism
	Curia	Curia
	Caesar	Pope
	Diocese (district)	Diocese
	Governors	Archbishops
	Province Rector	Rector
	Imperial Chair	Throne of St. Peter
	Vestal Virgins	Nuns
	Pontiff (high priest)	Pontiff
	Roman Calendar of the Gods	Holy Days of the Saints
	Imperial Degree (Voice of God)	Ex-Cathedra
	Apotheosis of the Gods	Canonization of the Saints