

Did Constantine Paganize the Catholic Church? Part 2

By Graham Osborne

If Jesus founded a church two millennia ago, and that Church is still in existence, if you're a Christian and not part of it, you would need some pretty strong justification for why not. So, inherent – in fact, necessary – in many Protestant, Mormon and Jehovah's Witnesses' teachings is the idea that while Jesus may have founded the Catholic Church, this Church has now undoubtedly totally apostacized and fallen from the truths Jesus left it. Otherwise, their denominations have little or no justification for existing, especially given Jesus' prayer for perfect Christian unity in John 17.

For example, returning to two of my previous columns, the existence of Mormonism hinges on their belief that the Church Jesus initially founded fell away. If this did not happen, then their founder, Joseph Smith's "mission" is misguided and the establishing of his church absolutely unnecessary. "*If the alleged apostasy of the primitive Church was not a reality, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is not the divine institution its name proclaims*" (James E. Talmadge, *The Great Apostasy*).

This is a serious charge, because it has the potential to lead people away from, or out of, Jesus' true Church, and it is often accompanied by misrepresented Scripture quotes and falsified history.

With this in mind, my last column examined this "total apostasy" theory. We saw that while Scripture does speak of individuals falling away from the Church – and sometimes in large numbers, particularly, just prior to Jesus Final Coming – there is not a single verse of Scripture that attests to a total apostasy of the Church Jesus founded. In fact, we see quite the opposite.

In Matthew 16:19, Jesus, the wisest of builders (cf. Matthew 7:24-25), builds his Church, "the pillar and foundation of truth" (1 Timothy 3:15), on rock: "You are Peter; and upon this *rock* I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." "Built upon the foundation of the Apostles ... with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone" (Ephesians 2:20-21), we can trace every Pope, in an unbroken line, back to St. Peter, and every Catholic Bishop, Priest and Deacon in the Catholic Church in an unbroken line back to one of the Apostles.

There is simply no doubt that the Church Jesus founded in Matthew 16 above is the Catholic Church. This is just simply a fact of history – with the name, "Catholic", being applied to the Church as early as the first century AD! And built upon rock, Jesus has promised his Church will never fall: "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

But some still insist that the Catholic Church did, in fact, apostacize, regardless of Jesus' promises and the "rock" solid Scriptural testimony to the contrary.

In an attempt to offer a plausible scenario for this theory, and apparently unaware of the actual historical situation of the first 300 years of Christianity, some literally invent a story of the Church falling away when the pagan Emperor Constantine came into power in the 300's.

Constantine, after receiving a vision from Heaven that led to a seemingly miraculous military victory that secured the Roman Empire for him, eventually converted to Catholicism. From here, the fabricated story goes on to claim that Constantine proceeded to make Catholicism the official religion of the Roman Empire, and in doing so, somehow paganized the Church in the process.

Some further speculate that by making conditions more favorable for Christianity in the Roman Empire, many may have entered the Church half-heartedly, seeking to gain social, political or economic advantage, and this further contributed to pagan influences eventually overtaking the true Christian faith.

Additionally, some insist that Constantine himself also introduced pagan elements into Christianity, such as Transubstantiation, Papal authority, the Communion of the Saints and more. And those on the more extreme end of the scale further allege that he actually *started* the Catholic Church, placing himself at its head!

Some also appeal to the notorious "*Donation of Constantine*" as further proof that the Papacy was a pagan construct implemented by Constantine. While space doesn't permit a full refutation of this fraudulent decree and associated anti-Catholic claims, there is irrefutable historical evidence that this was a forged document dating from the eighth or ninth century, with no connection to Constantine whatsoever. No reputable historian would even reference it to Constantine today, but it had much impact in medieval Europe before it was indisputably proven to be a forgery.

These wildly inaccurate claims are saddening, and they should shame any legitimate Christian genuinely interested in the truth. The true history of the situation is quite different.

For starters, Constantine *did not* make Catholicism the official religion of the Roman Empire. In signing the Edict of Milan with Emperor Licinius in 313,

often referred to as the Edict of Toleration, he simply made it permissible to be a Christian, officially ending centuries of Christian persecution – which was extremely intense under the previous Emperor, Diocletian – and restoring confiscated Christian property as well. Christianity would not become the official state religion of Rome until the Edict of Thessalonica in 380 AD – long after Constantine's death.

Long before Constantine, the Catholic Church – the only Christian Church in that period of history incidentally – had already been solidly in existence for almost three centuries – since the time of Jesus and the Apostles. And If you look at the pre-Constantine writings of the early Church, they clearly testify to the very same doctrines the Catholic Church teaches today: the Eucharist, Baptism, Apostolic Succession, the Papacy, Marian doctrines, and much more – all Catholic!

But undaunted by this incontrovertible history, some still try to claim that Constantine presided over and directed the Council of Nicaea in 325 – the first ecumenical/universal council of the Christian Church since the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 – again speculating that he introduced various pagan elements into Christianity specifically through this council. Some even allege that he determined the canon or list of books of the Bible at this council as well, keeping those books he liked, while tossing others.

Now these are certainly some interesting claims! While there is no doubt that Constantine was concerned about the religious disagreements going on in the Roman empire, and did play an important role in convoking the council (it is uncertain whether Constantine initially consulted with Pope Sylvester I over the calling of the council, but the aging Pope unable to travel, sent his representatives who became the first signatories on the final council document), Constantine did not participate in the discussions of the council or even have a vote!

And while Nicaea may have discussed a lot of things, the canon of Scripture was not one of them. Constantine had absolutely nothing to do with determining which books were truly inspired and part of Scripture. This determination was finalized with the help of the Holy Spirit through several Popes and Church Councils in the late 300's and early 400's.

Another noteworthy point is that Constantine himself initially had fairly strong leanings towards Arianism, a devastating and growing heresy of the time that denied the divinity of Jesus, claiming he was created by the Father, and so was neither eternal nor of the same nature as the Father.

It was precisely the Council of Nicaea that not only *condemned* this heresy, but gave us the foundations for the Nicene Creed – arguably the greatest formulation of Christian faith in the history of Christianity. If Constantine was really guiding the council – which he absolutely was not – why did this pivotal council not adopt his Arian views?

And if Constantine was such a pagan influence on the Christian Church as some insist, how did this council give us some of the most foundational doctrinal pronouncements about Jesus and the Trinity in the history of Christianity? Pronouncements that virtually every Christian – Catholic and Protestant – holds today?

In the end, the theory of Constantinian paganization of the Catholic Church is simply a sad misrepresentation of history at best, and a flat out lie at worst. While Constantine may not have been a perfect Christian – for example, there is suggestion that he withheld his own baptism until on his deathbed to ensure forgiveness of all the sins of his whole life, an illicit but occasional practice of his day – he made changes in how Christians were treated that helped lead to the evangelization of the whole world.

What Christian today would not have cheered Constantine's decision to permit Christians to practice their faith unpersecuted, and to allow the teaching of Christianity to proceed freely throughout the world? Would this not be the desire of every Christian: to convert the greatest pagan empire in the world to Christianity?