

Church and State

Our Catholic Heritage

A Chronic Problem for the Church

By FATHER THOMAS McMANUS

"For some time now we have noted that freedom of religion ought not to be restrained. Religion should be left to the mind and free will of each individual. Each should attend to his religious obligations as he sees fit. It is our decision that Christians too may be allowed to follow the belief and observances of their community and religion." (Edict of Milan, 313 A.D.)

In 312 A.D. the Emperor Constantine came to power. From the very beginning, his reign was touched by the finger of God. Early historians record the vision experienced by Constantine before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge.

"At noonday the sign of the Cross, formed of light, appeared in the sky, rising above the sun. The emperor affirmed that he was an

eye-witness. With the cross were the words: 'Conquer in this!' (Bishop Eusebius, Life of Constantine, c.330)

Constantine dedicated his army to Christ and won the battle that gave him the throne. From that day forward, the Church had her first imperial friend.

Constantine would be the first emperor to die a Christian. In the Edict of Milan, he granted Christianity religious toleration. He gave Pope Sylvester the land on which to build the Cathedral of Rome, St. John Lateran. The great basilicas of Rome in honor of Peter and Paul were built at his command. Though still a pagan in many ways, Constantine did much good for the Church. He also brought new problems.

It is said that the friendship of kings is a dangerous thing. Freedom was not an unmixed blessing. Con-

stantine stands at the beginning of what would be a chronic problem for the Church, the problem of caesaropapism (interference by civil authorities in Church affairs). He had the disturbing habit of referring to himself as "the equal of the apostles" or "bishop of external affairs." He even went to the length of presuming to summon a general council of the Church.

The most fateful of all his decisions was that of moving the capital of the empire to the east. He constructed a new city to house his government, and named it after himself — Constantinople. Although he may have shifted the political and military leadership to the new capital, he could not transfer the leadership of the Church which rests for all time in the Bishop of Rome.

"A hidden hand drove the emperor from the eternal city in order to

bestow it upon the head of the universal Church." (Joseph de Maistre)

In effect, Constantine did not create a new capital; he only created another capital.

For the next 1,000 years Rome and Constantinople endured a troubled and ultimately tragic relationship. The basic problem was that of recurring schism. The Bishop of Constantinople continually challenged the authority of the Bishop of Rome.

Eventually each of the great cities became the focus of a different empire. Rome sponsored the Holy Roman Empire; Constantinople was the foundation of the Byzantine Empire. Eventually religious division occurred along the same lines. The west remained loyal to the Catholic faith; the east split off into the Orthodox Church. The tragic schism remains to this day.

St. Helena's Quest for the True Cross

By FATHER THOMAS McMANUS

"Most noble of women." (Constantine)

The future empress and saint was born at Drepanum in Bythynia (present day Turkey) about the year 255 A.D. The town was later renamed Helenopolis in her honor. She was the daughter of an innkeeper. Despite her lowly birth she captured the heart of the Roman general Constantius Chlorus, and became his wife about the year 270.

During one of their many journeys from one military post to another, she gave birth to her son Constantine, at Nish, in present day Serbia. Not long after this, Constantius Chlorus divorced her for political reasons, in the rather heartless manner of the pagans.

In the year 312 her son came to power as emperor. About the same time Helena became a Christian. She was about 60 years old.

"She became such a devout servant of God under her son's influence that she might well have been a disciple of the saviour of mankind from her very childhood." (Bishop Eusebius)

In the year 324 she began her famous journey through the Holy Land in quest of the remains of the True Cross.

"She worshipped not the wood, but the King, Him who hung upon the wood. She burned with

an ardent desire of touching the guarantee of immortality." (St. Ambrose, d. 398)

Socrates of Constantinople (d. 440) describes the



(Art by Robert F. McGovern)

St. Helena

events that led up to the finding of the Cross, with which Helena's name is forever linked.

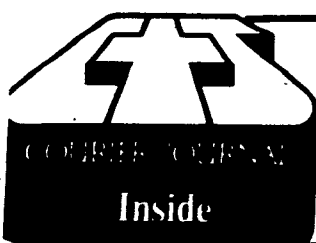
"She began with great diligence to seek for the Holy Sepulchre. It was a difficult business to be sure, but with the help of God she found it . . . The Christians worshipped devoutly at the sepulchre after the death of Christ. Those who hated Christianity built a temple to Venus over the sepulchre, and covered the site with walls. By setting up a pagan goddess they hoped to abolish the memory of the sepulchre . . . Helena had the pagan image razed, and began excavations. Three crosses were discovered on the site. One of them was the Sacred Cross on which Christ had hung. The other two were those of the thieves. She also found the tablet on which Pilate had written in various languages: 'This is the King of the Jews!'"

Helena ended her days in the Holy Land as a builder of shrines and benefactor of the poor.

"In the sight of all she continually resorted to the churches, appearing humbly dressed among the praying women." (Bishop Eusebius)

Helena died in Nicodemia about the year 330. She remains the paradigm of Christian royalty.

"Though empress of the world and mistress of the Empire she looked upon herself as the servant of the handmaids of Christ." (Bishop Eusebius)



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