Constantine the Great: A Brief Biographical Sketch

By Knight Companion Michael J. Ramos

On the 27th of February in the year 272 A.D., Flavius Constantius, a native Latin speaking pagan from what is now Bulgaria and an imperial bodyguard in the Roman army who eventually would become one of the four Emperors of the Tetrarchy, and Flavia Julia Helena, a Greek Christian of humble background born in what is now Turkey, welcomed the birth of their son, Flavius Valerius Constantinus – better known to us today as the Emperor Constantine the Great.

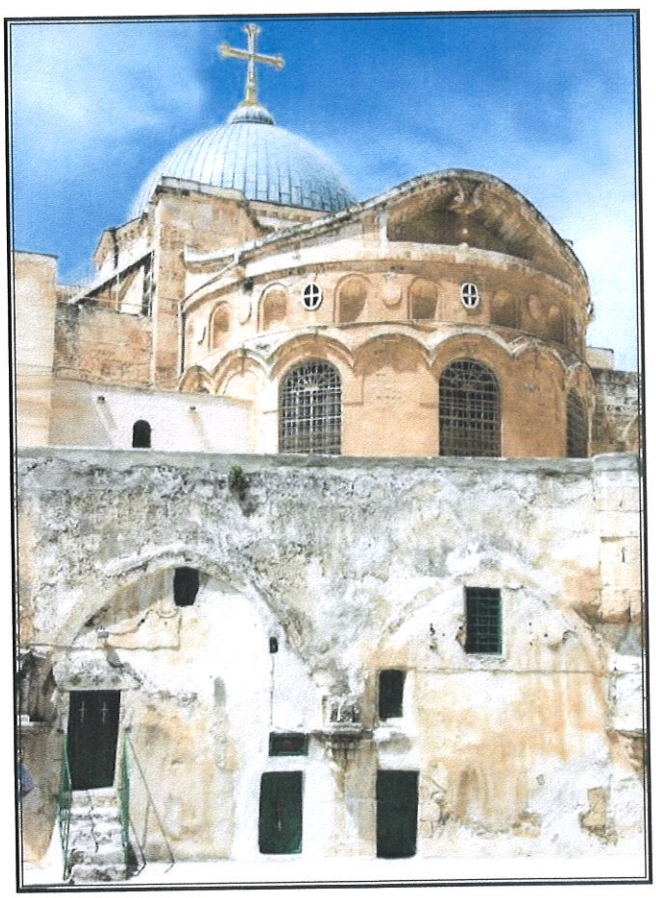
As child-heir-apparent to his father's position, Constantine would move from his birthplace in what would now be considered Serbia, to the court of the Emperor Diocletian in Dalmatia where he received, while being more or less held as a hostage, a royal education which introduced him to various literature, ideologies, philosophies and religions.

Constantine served as an outstanding soldier and eventually obtained the rank of a Military Tribune of the First Order; and it is important to note, that this was during a time when Dioclecian cast an edict demanding universal persecution of Christians. Whether Constantine himself actually participated in any way to support these orders is unknown.

In 305 A.D., Diocletian resigned his position due to an ongoing illness. Immediately following, Constantius requested Constantine's leave to join him in Roman Britain. One year later, after battling the Picts far beyond Hadrian's Wall, Constantius fell gravely ill. Before his passing he was able to obtain military support to proclaim Constantine full *Augustus*. The proclamation was not at all regular and angered the Emperors in the East. Ultimately, civil war was saved when Constantine acquiesced to the lesser title of Caesar, or Emperor, and thereby obtained the support of his ascension throughout the Empire.

Constantine reigned over Britannia, Gaul and Hispania, and expanded his rule in the northwest via brutal campaigns. Although even during times of war, Constantine was a firm supporter of infrastructure and building projects and held tolerant policies towards Christians and other religions. We might consider that Constantine was developing into a leader who understood the necessity for both material strength and spiritual harmony.

In 307 A.D., Constantine married Flavia Maxima Fausta, the daughter of Emperor Maximian, which garnered a short-lived reunited alliance between the two families. For in 310 A.D., Maximian would attempt a failed takeover, which induced Constantine to convince him to commit suicide, which was considered a form of leniency. Maximian's most devoted son, Maxentius, after inheriting his father's position as an Emperor, began striking coins and circulating propaganda in an attempt to help save his shamed father's



legacy. In reaction Constantine caused all known images and references to the former Emperor destroyed.

After witnessing Constantine further stabilize his region's support and his own personal popularity via mystical orations concerning the heavenly sanction of his rule, Maxentius would ultimately declare all-out war, which eventually would lead to the Battle of Milvian Bridge on the 28th of October 312 A.D.

This battle, so famously memorialized by Constantine's soldier's shields being marked with the Chi-Rho, would prove quick and brutal, with Maxentius being drowned under the weight of his own slaughtered and fleeing soldiers. The cause of the aforementioned markings has been relayed in various frameworks and themes. Lactantius, an author and advisor to Constantine, recorded that it came to the Emperor in a dream; Eusebius of Nicomedia, biographer and the priest who eventually would baptize Constantine, recorded a much more elaborate vision in which the Emperor saw the cross made of lights in the heavens, above the sun, and bearing the inscription *In Hoc Signo Vinces*. Additionally, he records that Constantine had a dream the following evening where Jesus Christ told him to make the standard, that we know as the labarum, for when marching into battle, and would thereby know guaranteed victory.

Regardless of how it happened, this battle and recorded vision would ultimately prove as the catalyst for one of the greatest epochs in the history of mankind. In the years that followed, Constantine would spearhead the Edict of Milan, which legalized Christianity – and all religions - throughout the entire Roman Empire, and all but stopped red martyrdom and even saw the return of property and other items which had been seized during previous persecutions. As a patron, he supported the early Church financially. He had basilicas erected, exempted the clergy from certain taxes, and promoted Christians to various offices of prominence. He legislated to make Sunday a day of rest for all citizens, removed Christians from participating in compulsory state animal

sacrifice ceremonies, and was instrumental in attempting to unify the Christian faith through Church Councils.

In the same year he would become sole Emperor of the entire Roman Empire, he found it prudent to create a new Christian capital that would serve the eastern portion of the empire in an even superior position to that of Rome in the west. After various considerations, in 324 A.D., Constantine determined that he would re-christen the city of Byzantium with the name of Constantinople. The city was to serve as an urban epicenter for faith, education and wealth. The Church of the Holy Apostles was erected on the site of a pagan temple, and the art of the old Gods was refurbished to include both Jewish and Christian iconography and symbolism.

In 325 A.D., Constantine held the Council of Nicaea which ultimately produced a version of the Nicene Creed – which to this day is known, repeated, and practiced (in one shape or form) by most mainstream old-world branches of Christianity. In addition, it helped again to root out defined heresies and promote proper practices, provided clearer separation between the Mosaic Dispensation and that of the Christian faith, the formal use of the Julian Calendar, and the prohibition of Jews owning Christian slaves, etc.

Following his mother Helena's Holy Land sojourn in 326 or 327 A.D., she and Constantine commissioned the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem to commemorate the birth of Christ, and in Jerusalem the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which encompassed the believed locations of His crucifixion, interment, and resurrection. In Rome, Old Saint Peter's Basilica was erected on the hill which was said to hold Peter's grave.

Regardless of all that could be positively contributed to his legacy, Constantine was a man, just as fallible, emotionally reckless and prone to violence as any of his contemporaries in his position. We cannot fairly examine his biography without making mention of how he put his eldest son, Crispus, and wife, Fausta, to death in 326 A.D. To speculate on "why" would ultimately create as many false circumstances as it would questions. Suffice it to say, for all the decisions he

made that ultimately lifted up the Christian religion and its people, we must consider his horrid mistakes as much as we admire his benevolent resolutions.

In the winter of 337 A.D., Constantine became ill. Shortly after Easter of the same year, he was baptized by Eusebius of Nicomedia, the Bishop of the city where he lay near death – never being baptized in the River Jordan as he so desired - and dying shortly after on the 22nd of May, being laid to rest in The Church of the Holy Apostles, with his remains surviving up through the 4th Crusade in the 13th century, but sadly being destroyed at some unknown point afterwards.

Constantine was the second longest running Emperor having ruled for thirty-one years; Caesar Augustus having ruled for forty-one. By the middle ages he was being hailed as a Solomonic figure which rulers should aspire to emulate. His life and works affected continents, countries, cultures, customs, church, state, and the spirit of allegory held within our own beloved Constantinian branch of Chivalric Masonry. False histories and acts attributed to him have been written to glorify his worldly deeds and spiritual insights, as well as to associate him and his kin to the bloodlines of various monarchs and the lineages of various places and institutions. In his life, Constantine was a living myth; a walking and breathing symbol in the making. In death he would be canonized as a saint within Eastern Orthodox Christianity, and remains venerated by the Eastern Catholic, Lutheran and Anglican traditions. Ultimately, as with all people worth celebrating 1,749 years after their birth, he is as equally controversial as he is cherished.

Knight Companion Michael J. Ramos is a member of St. Francis Conclave in San Francisco, California. He joined Constantine in 2019. He is a Past Master of Crow Canyon Lodge No. 551 and Templum Rosae Lodge No. 863. Inspired by the eighteenth-century Freemasons of England known as the 'Antients', the Brethren of Templum Rosae share a belief that a Mason's journey culminates in the august Degree of the Holy Royal Arch. He is the Lodge Development Manager for the Grand Lodge of California.