

May 27, 2012

Sunday Sermon

Fr Ambrose Young
Entrance of the Theotokos Skete



In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I have wanted to write this sermon for a long time.

Last Monday was the Feast of Saints Constantine and Helena in the Orthodox Church. This sermon could have been given on that day, but I wanted it to have a larger audience because, as I said, I've wanted to write this sermon for a long time.

Why? Because I am so tired of the way in which so-called scholars and academics—almost all of them unbelievers and skeptics—continue to write about the man we refer to as “the Holy Emperor, Crowned by God and Equal to the Apostles, Constantine the Great.”

Not having what we Orthodox call “the mind of the Church”—which is sensitive to higher spiritual realities than what can be merely replicated in a science lab—most scholars today write about St. Constantine as though he were just another Roman Emperor with all of the vices and weaknesses, pride and ambition thereof; and because he was so clearly supportive of Christianity, they try to tear him down. They do this because of course the milieu in which they are writing today is not only *non-Christian* but, these days, more and more openly *anti-Christian*. And the “portrait” they relentlessly paint of this sacred Emperor is not only *not* a pretty one, but is well nigh unrecognizable to Orthodox Christians.

It's important to straighten this out, because our youth today are growing up with the Church's correct view and understanding of the great Emperor and his unique “place” in Church history, and *then* they go off to college, where agnostic or atheist or anti-Byzantine professors give them a completely different interpretation, and a vile one at that. For some, this could cause a crisis in faith. Who is right? The Church or the “authoritative” scholars, our kids might wonder.

So the feast day of these two inestimable figures, St. Constantine and his mother, St. Helena, gives us the opportunity to remind ourselves that the Church's received tradition, which is inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit, is on a completely different level than mere political history, although it is also completely faithful to the authentic history of the 4th century. Our understanding of this man—and his holy mother, don't forget—has been

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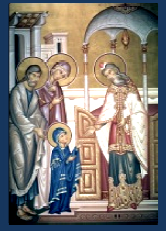
beautifully and accurately preserved in Orthodoxy for (and here I want to throw a big theological term at you) for “the confirmation of its *eschatological dimension*” (The Synaxarion). What the heck does this mean—“eschatological dimension”? Well, it’s actually very important to know what it means and for us to grasp its significance in today’s world.

“Eschatology,” you see, is that part of theology which is concerned with death, judgment, and the final destiny of the soul and of humankind and the final events in the history of the world. In other words, it deals with “the Last Things.” It’s a very important and specialized field of theology, one that the Holy Fathers did not by any means neglect in their extensive writings. One might wonder what the life of a fourth century Byzantine emperor could possibly have to do with the “final events” in mankind’s history. Simply this: that the glory and virtue of the Christian Empire and civilization which St. Constantine founded in the 4th century was nothing less, according to the Church Fathers, that a symbol of the glory of the Kingdom of God which is to come at the end of the ages. “It is in *this* way, and not as some imperial (or Greek) nostalgia, that the faithful venerate” the holy Emperor St. Constantine the Great, and his righteous mother. So this is not an “ethnic thing”—though that might come as a surprise to some Greeks and Greek Americans!—the feast of this Emperor and his mother is kept throughout the Orthodox world, by Russians and Serbs, and so forth, and it has nothing to do with “greekness” and *everything* to do with eschatology and what I like to call “the mysticism of history.”

However, as I already said, none, absolutely none of this is understood much less taken into consideration by secular writers and historians. Yet it is critical for all of us, Orthodox and non-Orthodox, believers and non-believers alike, to understand *because the very Christian civilization that St. Constantine brought into being in the 4th century, and which so profoundly influence and even formed all of Christianity, both East and West, religious-wise and in politics, law and government, is now slowly but surely crumbling all around us.* Anyone who pays more than superficial attention to the news can see this. Our Christian civilization is actually now dying, in terms of its ability to influence and form the culture, morality, and values. *That* function has now been taken over by the media—both news and entertainment—which now appears to have infallible authority to teach us how to live, how to behave, and what to think—all the while pushing Christianity ruthlessly out the back door, throwing dung and mud at it as it retreats.

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So, this is another reason why we should pay some attention to St. Constantine and not just venerate him but ask him to pray to the Lord God for us, we who have been chosen to live in this, the end of the Christian era as Constantine would have known it.

The currently popular “version” or “interpretation” of Constantine today is as follows, according to the Antiochian Orthodox writer, Robert Arakaki:

“Where Roman Catholics present him as laying the foundation for the Papacy, Protestants see him as the one responsible for leading the early Church away from the simplicity of the pure gospel and turning it into an institutional Church.” *Both of these views is incorrect*, but popular and completely inaccurate and laughable bestsellers like Dan Brown’s novel “The Da Vinci Code” have helped to spread this misinformation more widely than any real scholar could have done!

A Sunday sermon is not the place to try to tell the amazing and extremely complex life, career, and spirituality of St. Constantine. In fact, his mother alone deserves a sermon all in her honor, as she played an equally important part in the protection and development of early Christian culture and civilization. But I want to assure you that the secular writers—who usually don’t believe in anything spiritual and/or supernatural is actually *real*—do not tell you the whole and true story of this man! You can, however, read about it in the Synaxarion and various lives of the saints, and I urge you to do so if you haven’t before.

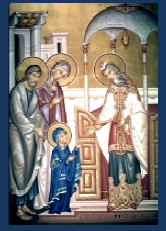
Over the years I have encountered some converts to Orthodoxy who were well read in secular history before they converted and had imbibed the idea that St. Constantine, far from being a saint of the Church, was actually a very bad man—perhaps a good administrator but, as far as the standards of the Gospel go, a great sinner and even a blot on Christianity.

According to a current Orthodox Christian and scholar:

“Unfortunately, largely out of ignorance of the witness of the Church and under the influence of trendy and superficial historical thinking hostile to the traditions of Orthodoxy, there are many today who question the sanctity of St. Constantine the Great, who ushered in the Peace of the Church and made Christianity the official

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religion of the Roman Empire. Drawing from pagan sources and *ignoring the witness of Christian historians*, heterodox — and, sadly enough, some Orthodox — scholars have variously attributed the veneration of St. Constantine to...popular piety gone astray and religious fantasy. Setting aside the superficiality of such historiographical sources...and turning to the hagiographical witness of the Church, we find *irrefutable evidence* of the sanctity of the Emperor Saint, who, coming down from Heaven, appeared to St. Paisios the Great, one of the renowned Desert Fathers.

“The following words, spoken by St. Constantine when he appeared bathed in Divine light to St. Paisios, are worthy of repetition, since they rightly characterize the virtuous humility of the Emperor, while at the same time constituting an important tribute to the ranks of holy and saintly monastics:

“I am Constantine the Great. I have descended from the Heavens in order to reveal to you the glory which monastics are shown in the Heavens, as well as their closeness to Christ and their boldness before Him. I reproach and accuse myself that I did not attain to such splendor as that of the rank of monastics. I cannot reckon the loss which I have incurred. I do not have the same boldness as monastics, nor do I have an honor equal to theirs.” (John Sandinopolis, Mystagogy)

When Constantine died in 327 A.D. at the age of 80, he could look back on an enormous task, accomplished by the grace of God and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit: first, he had freed and then established Christianity which, at that time, was the same Faith in both the Eastern and Western half’s of the Empire, *the very same Faith that has been preserved and passed down to us today in Holy Orthodoxy*. He had protected the Church under his mighty imperial wings, bringing about Church Councils to settle difficult issues that had plagued the early Church, and encouraged the growth of monasticism everywhere. In his capitol city, Constantinople, he saw to the establishment of a society based upon the Gospels—to a degree never again seen in all of Christian history.

Those who knew him and actually lived with him during his lifetime knew that while he was a stern and just ruler, he was also a personal paragon of virtue. Even pagans at the time praised him. But after his death, when he was succeeded by his nephew, Julian the Apostate, people turned against him, inspired by the Emperor Julian’s own hatred of his uncle and of Christianity. Julian wrote diatribes against him, calling him inferior to the great pagan emperors, and given over to luxury and greed. This slander continued right on through the

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centuries and eventually became the accepted “settled view” of academics in the Western world, especially since the late 18th century. But as I’ve explained, none of this is true. None of it--and we Orthodox, whether Greek or Russian, Serbian, Romanian, or convert—all of us have a responsibility to speak the truth about this great man, especially when we see or hear or read that he is being, once again, maligned and distorted, for these slanders against him are slanders against the Church and against the activity of the Holy Spirit in history.

There are probably more churches dedicated to St. Constantine and his mother than any other saints. This says something significant, doesn’t it? It testifies to the age old and universal witness of the Holy Spirit in the Orthodox Church that these figures are definitely a part of the great cloud of witnesses cheering us on to finish the spiritual race, the goal of which is nothing less than the Kingdom of God itself.

The enmity shown Constantine today of course corresponds to the present and ongoing war against traditional Christianity and even the idea of a Christian culture and social order, much less a Christian government, all of which are being deliberately and decisively buried in the West today. Let us see this clearly and have no illusions about what is really being attacked here. Rather let us venerate and ask the intercessions of the Emperor St. Constantine and his holy and gracious mother.

As we sing in the troparion for Saints Constantine:

Having seen the figure of the Cross in the heavens,
And like Paul not having received his call from men, O Lord,
Your apostle among rulers, the Emperor Constantine,
Has been set by Your hand as ruler over the Imperial City
That he preserved in peace for many years,
Through the prayers of the Theotokos, O only lover of mankind.

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.