

Question: When did Christianity become a legal religion able to be practiced in the Roman Empire?

Answer: The emperor Constantine (b.274?-d.337) is responsible for changing the face of Christianity and making it a legal religion able to be practiced in the Roman Empire. Constantine himself converted to Christianity and made it the official religion of the Roman Empire after an experience he had while preparing for battle at the Milvian Bridge in 312 A.D. Maximian, one of the Roman emperors during the tetrarch reign that oversaw the Great Persecution of Christians with Diocletian (ruled from 284-305), had a son named Maxentius. Maxentius (ruled from 306-312) declared himself emperor of the Roman Empire illegitimately with the support of the Praetorian Guard. In the year 310, Constantine repudiated Maxentius' illegitimate claim to the throne and declared himself the sole emperor and direct descendent of Claudius Gothicus (ruled from 268-270) a Roman Emperor for a brief time, and the sun god Sol Invictus, a powerful and widely worshipped Roman deity. Through these declarations Constantine waged war against Maxentius.

As is clear from his claim to being the sun god Sol Invictus, Constantine was heavily involved in the worship of the Roman Imperial Cult. In fact, there is no indication leading up to the battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 that Constantine had any interest with the Christian religion. But, on October 27, 312, the evening before the battle, Constantine had a dream in which he was advised to embrace the power of the Christian God. According to Lactantius a close associate, "Constantine was directed in a dream to mark the celestial sign of God on his shields and thus to engage in battle." (*Christianity and the Roman Empire*, Novak, 156). Lactantius also gives account of the victory that Constantine's army received, "against the enemy without any commander" because of the vision and subsequent actions of the emperor (*Christianity*, 156).

Eusebius of Caesarea, another Constantine historian, gives a similar account of Constantine's vision. Eusebius' account goes into much more detail, in which Constantine decides on his own before he had a vision to pray to the Christian God who had brought success to his father. Constantine believed that those emperors who had worshipped the many pagan gods had failed in battle because they were not in God's favor. Contrary to his action of claiming to be Sol Invictus, Constantine "judged it to be folly indeed to join in the idle worship of those who were not gods. . .and therefore felt it incumbent on him to honor his father's God alone" (*Christianity*, 157). With the acceptance of the Supreme God, Constantine prayed and offered supplications in hopes that God would reveal himself to Constantine and give a hand in his present need. Around noon on the day of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, Constantine "saw with his own eyes the trophy of a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, and bearing the inscription, CONQUER BY THIS" (*Christianity*, 157). Constantine was assured that the symbol he saw would safeguard him and his army against the enemy. Constantine claims that God revealed the "Saviors name, two letters indicating the name of Christ by means of its initial characters, the letter P (the Greek letter Rho) being intersected by X (the Greek letter Chi) in its center" (*Christianity*, 158). Constantine's army won the decisive battle and Maxentius was thrown into the river at the Milvian Bridge and drowned. The symbol that God gave Constantine was placed on his shield, and the shields of his soldiers. From the point of his victory onward, the emperor constantly made use of the sign of salvation as a safeguard against every adverse and hostile power, and commanded that the symbol should be carried at the head of all his armies (*Christianity*, 158).

Following his decisive when at the Milvian Bridge, Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 314. The edict states that the empire "should give both Christians and to all men the freedom to follow religion, whichever one each one chose, so that whatever sort of divinity there is in heavenly regions may be gracious and propitious to us and to all who live under our government" (*Christianity*, 162). Because of the edict, Christians no longer had to practice their faith secretly and in fear. Christianity spread quickly throughout the Roman Empire becoming the most popular and widely practiced religion. Transitioning from being illegal, to widely practiced, the Church and its believers underwent many growing pains. Several conflicts and disagreements led Constantine to call and oversee the well known Council of Nicea in 325. The council produced the Nicene Creed that we recite in a modified way today. The council also worked on defining a canon and clarifying certain Christian beliefs.