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Donald Trump is certainly a controversial figure in our times. Some Catholics, considering the upcoming presidential election, may be torn between seeing the good he has done as president for the Church in America and his checkered personal life. President Trump has done more than any president to: advance the fight against abortion, promote school choice for parents, permit citizens to be exempt from laws and regulations that would compel them to violate their religious beliefs, and return to official public life the language of prayer and God. These and other examples indicate that what he has done as president has in many ways advanced the goal of the Church to Christianize American society – or at least to reverse some of the de-Christianization of the past few decades.

And to be clear, when I say “for the Church” I do not mean good for the diocesan bureaucracies and their generally politically correct bishops. I mean for the Mystical Body and Bride of Christ herself, that is, the Church as a divine institution and in all her purity (despite the failings and unworthiness of her human element).

Some Good Work but a Scandalous Life

It is clear that Donald Trump is not a Roman Catholic. Although he has shown respect for the true Church, for example, by accepting a statue of Our Lady of Fatima for the White House, he has not publicly (or, to the best of our knowledge, privately) converted to the Faith. He seems to have some affiliation to the Episcopal sect, in which he and Melania were “married” (2005) and their son, Baron, was baptized as an infant (2006). He has divorced twice before civilly “marrying” Melania, who, although having been baptized and raised Catholic, seems to have abandoned the true Church for the Episcopal sect, perhaps due to the impediment to marrying Mr. Trump due to his past marriages.

It would be therefore completely wrong to compare Donald Trump to a St. Louis IX, who not only advanced the cause of the Church but lived an exemplary Christian life. A more apt comparison to help us understand his relationship to the cause of the Church in our times would seem to be the Emperor Constantine the Great (reigned A.D. 306-337, as sole emperor beginning in 324).

The Paradox of Constantine in History

Constantine is a figure in history that is difficult to characterize. His role in establishing the Church at the heart of the Roman Empire is undisputed. Yet, the Church has never

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considered Constantine a saint (not by the Roman Church, anyway), and for good reasons. The great good he did for the Church must be acknowledged, but his life, although ending with the reception of Baptism, is a complex tale. He ultimately set the empire on the course that led to Christendom, but his measures and reforms were imperfect and incomplete.

Constantine was the product of what we would call today a broken home. His father, Constantius, abandoned his mother, St. Helena, to take a more politically correct wife to advance his political ambitions. Constantine was both a part of the inner circle of power in the pagan empire (spending several years at the court of the Emperor Galerius) and an outsider. His elevation to the office of Caesar was proclaimed by the armies in Britain and was decidedly contrary to the succession plans laid out by Diocletian and Galerius. He was essentially “elected” by the rank-and-file against the plans of the elites.

Despite his mother being a Christian, Constantine was not for most of his life. He was not baptized until on his death bed, decades after his rise to power. He seems for much of his life to have held a syncretistic philosophy. He freed the Church from persecution and promoted its interests but often in a way that would not offend the pagans. He restricted the construction and renovation of pagan temples but tolerated most of its activities. According to the [Catholic Encyclopedia](#), “For a time it seemed as if merely tolerance and equality were to prevail. Constantine showed equal favour to both religions. As *pontifex maximus* he watched over the heathen worship and protected its rights.” He was far from what we would call an integrally Catholic ruler, such as was President [Gabriel Garcia Moreno](#) of Ecuador. Like his father, he had two women. The first, Minervina, was either his wife whom he put away or a concubine. He had a son with her. In either case, he moved on to a second woman, Fausta, whom he later executed.

Although he advanced the cause of reforming Roman law and society to better accord with Catholic morality, this work was far from consistent. He reduced the causes for divorce, for example, but still permitted it in certain cases. Similarly, it is important to note that the decree did not declare Christianity the state religion (as Christian rulers are obligated to do) but merely tolerated Christianity, Judaism, and Paganism. He did not end pagan rites but merely outlawed their most offensive aspects such as magic and divination and some particularly revolting ceremonies.

Yet, notwithstanding his imperfect political record and less-than-pure personal life, Constantine clearly had some remarkable contact with the true religion on the eve of his battle at the Milvian Bridge on October 28, 312. He saw in a dream or vision the Cross of Christ inscribed with the words *In Hoc Signo Vincas* (“in this sign, conquer”). He responded by ordering his soldiers to put the sign of Christ on their shields. He publicly attributed his victory to the God of the Christians. Early the following year, he publicly ended all

persecution of the Church with his Edict of Milan (A.D. 313). He soon moved from tolerating the Church to supporting and officially endowing her. He made vast donations for the construction of churches and/or the conversion of pagan temples. He advanced Catholics in his bureaucracy. He promoted orthodoxy in the Church by convening (with the pope) and participating publicly in the First Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325) that condemned Arianism. Finally, as already noted, he did on his deathbed request and receive baptism into the Church.

Lessons from the Paradox of Constantine

The Church, both during his own lifetime and down through the centuries, has been keenly aware of the failings and contradictions in the life of Constantine. She did not, however, refuse his hand of friendship in ending persecution on the grounds that it did not perfectly achieve the goal of publicly acknowledging Christianity as the only true religion. As the [Catholic Encyclopedia](#) notes about the edict:

“When the wording of the edict is carefully examined there is clear evidence of an effort to express the new thought in a manner too unmistakable to leave any doubt. The edict contains more than the belief, to which Galerius at the end had given voice, that the persecutions were useless, and it granted the Christians freedom of worship, while at the same time it endeavored not to affront the pagans. Without doubt the term *deity* was deliberately chosen, for it does not exclude a heathen interpretation.”

Clearly, the Edict of Milan is unacceptable as an act of the Magisterium of the Church as it certainly appears syncretistic. Yet, on the heels of centuries of persecution, the Church did not refuse the freedom which toleration brought her and urge the return of a pagan insider like the brutal Diocletian or Maxentius. The Church did not denounce Constantine’s reforms of Roman marriage law because they were incomplete and contained exceptions that the Church denied. She did not call for his removal as emperor because he only curbed the worst aspects of paganism rather than banning it entirely. She did not refuse his endowments to the Church because he lived an immoral life and had not accepted baptism. She did not even bar him from officially participating in an official way as head of the civil government in the great Ecumenical Council of Nicaea. She did not tell Catholics to absent themselves from his government and wait for a pure, integrally Catholic emperor to emerge.

No, without compromising the principles she taught, the Church saw an ally – the best ally in her life to date – willing to protect and promote the Church in Roman society. She also

saw a confused man who took halting steps toward the true religion. Although not embracing Christianity, he publicly acknowledged its place and ordered his soldiers to publicly display the sign of Christ. In a choice between Constantine and St. Louis IX for emperor, clearly the Church would unequivocally choose Louis. Yet, such a choice was not offered in the fourth century.

Because the Church understands the distinction (not separation) between Church and State, she recognized that civil rulers cannot completely Christianize society in an integral way without acknowledging the Church as the only true religion. At most, they can dispose society for such a leader to be possible by aiding the Church to convert society. Christendom could only be born after the Catholic religion was so proclaimed. Yet, the Church had the wisdom and prudence to see that path might have to be accomplished in stages. Constantine did not bring into being Christendom, but his limited measures did end the worst of the pagan culture and gave the Church the liberty (which is hers by divine right) to Christianize society so that a later emperor could proclaim Catholicism the religion of the empire.

Is Trump the Constantine of Our Time?

The similarities between Constantine and Donald Trump seem somewhat evident after this brief summary of the emperor's life and influence. Like Constantine, Donald Trump has surprisingly come to power against the wishes of the elites of the new paganism of the American empire. He has clearly been touched in some way by grace to at least acknowledge imperfectly the importance of God and religion in the public life of our country. (His [message](#) at the beginning of Lent 2020 is one example.) He has taken imperfect steps to free the Church from persecution, such as eliminating the crushing fines imposed by Obamacare for refusing to provide contraception and abortion in Church-sponsored medical coverage. He has taken limited action to reduce and restrict abortion and other evils. He has not turned America into a new Christendom; yet, he has done more than any prior president (including Republican ones) to protect and promote public recognition of religion and Christian moral principles. He has done all of this notwithstanding his own moral failings.

Will Donald Trump's story end like Constantine's? Will he convert and enter the Church before his death? (For this, we should certainly pray!) Will his time as president be seen as granting a breathing space from vicious persecution that allowed the Church enough freedom to change the course of history?

Only time will tell. Yet, we should follow the example of the Church of the fourth century and not refuse the hand of genuine friendship and concrete positive steps in the right

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direction because that friendship and those steps are imperfectly offered by an imperfect sinful man. If, instead of a battle, an election were posed between Constantine and Maxentius (who wished to return to the brutal persecution of Diocletian), I cannot imagine the Church of the time would have directed her children to support Maxentius or to abstain and remain aloof from such an important turning point on the grounds that Constantine did not propose the integral solution.

How different Western history would have been if Constantine had not embraced the sign of Christ and attributed his victory to it.

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