

# Lesson 18 - The Church Is Freed

## *Objectives*

By the end of this lesson the student should know that:

- Recognize that Constantine the Great became the first Christian Roman emperor.
- Know that the Roman persecution of Christians was ended in AD 313 with the emperors' Edict of Milan.
- Understand that the signs of the new freedom for Christians in the Roman Empire were a more elaborate liturgy and church buildings, a more visible ministry to the needy, and the rise of monasticism.
- Know that the Fathers of the Church are those teachers who gave new direction and leadership to the Church through their writings.

## *For the Catechist*

Constantine's experience at the Milvian Bridge would ultimately change the course of Christian history. Constantine came to see himself as "the emperor of the Christian people." He obliged Licinius, Emperor of the East, to join him in issuing the edict of toleration at Milan. As their relationship turned from colleagues to rivals, repression of Christians in the eastern provinces began again. Finally, in 324 Licinius attacked Constantine's forces but was defeated and executed. One of Constantine's first acts as sole emperor of East and West was to forbid pagan sacrifices in his realm.

Christianity became more and more visible in society, and the Church became a dominant factor in the affairs of the Empire. There were ever increasing numbers of converts, but not all were as dedicated as their predecessors during the persecutions. While the leadership of the Church became more articulate, the rank and file became less devout. In response, there was a growth in monasticism. These ascetics responded to the changing fortunes of Christians by a more complete and total dedication to Christ. Their witness and writings would contribute greatly to the spiritual life of the Church, especially in the East.

The writings of the Church Fathers and the witness and writings of the ascetics are considered a significant part of our Holy Tradition, setting our Churches on a course that they still follow today. The Greek Fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries - along with their fellows of succeeding centuries, such as Saint John of Damascus - set the direction of our Church's understanding of Scripture, theology, liturgy, spirituality, and iconography. The brief excerpts from the Fathers in this lesson are meant to be an introduction to their writings for our students; they should be reminders to us that we are called to deepen our own familiarity with the legacy of the Fathers and ascetics as well.

## *Materials Needed:*

*Opening Prayer:* Icon corner, student texts

*Introduction:* Bibles, easel or wall pad, markers,

*Activity A:* "You Will Conquer" Worksheet, pencils and paper or craft materials

*Activity B:* "St Basil" Worksheets

*Activity C:* *Byzantium*, TV and VCR or DVD player

*Activity D:* Kingdom Tree Worksheets, craft items

## *Icons and Pictures:*

*Come Bless the Lord:* Three Holy Hierarchs (#30)

### 1. Opening Prayer

Pray the hymn on page 90 in the student text. Remind the students that the martyrs are described as the first-fruits of the new creation: the "crop" planted by Christ and His Apostles.

### 2. Review

Review the main points of the previous lesson using the pages from your wall or easel pad. Use the time line on the Unit Page to recall that the age of the martyrs fulfilled Christ's words that His followers would suffer for Christ and the Gospel.

Ask the students to share what they remember about Saint Ignatius of Antioch or any of the other martyrs presented in the last lesson; discuss the reasons why Rome's pagans denounced the Christians in their midst.

### 3. Introduction

Ask the students which U.S. President they think had the greatest impact on this country and why. Possible answers might be:

- George Washington (Winning the Revolutionary War, guiding the establishment of the new nation).
- Abraham Lincoln (Ending slavery, winning the Civil War).
- Franklin D. Roosevelt (Ending the Great Depression, winning World War II).

Conclude by saying that today you will be discussing the Roman emperor who helped change the course of history in the West. We learned about him in our first lesson this year. Who was he?

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### ***Background Reading (Tradition, Work of the Holy Spirit):***

"One of the most important gifts of the Spirit is *Holy Tradition*. Authentic Tradition is the life of God given to the Church by the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ. It has been described as 'like a mirror, in which the Church, during its pilgrim journey here on earth, contemplates God, from whom she receives everything, until such time as she is brought to see him face to face as he really is (cf. 1 Jn 3:2)' (*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, 7). Living Tradition is the way that the Church accepts and expresses the life given to it by our Lord Jesus Christ. It cannot be reduced to a certain number of facts or sayings, but is the acceptance and perception of the whole reality that underlies all the faith.

"Most Protestant communities hold to only one deposit of the truths of faith, the Bible. For the historic Churches, however, revelation is seen as more than a collection of practices, sayings and facts that are contained in the Bible. It is rather the totality of life in Christ witnessed to by apostolic writers and Fathers of the Church, which amplifies and focuses written Scripture through the life and understanding of the people of God. Sacred Scripture was not written in a timeless vacuum nor is the Holy Spirit limited to the pages of Scripture. The same Spirit who inspired the apostolic writers has also been at work in the Fathers of the Church, the formative Councils, the divine services, the icons and the experience of the saints forming a continuity of life and faith with the early Church."

*(continued on next page)*

#### 4. Guided Reading, Pages 91-92

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The Roman Empire was a great power in Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. It was also a military state, ruled by the army and its strongest generals. Emperors were often chosen by the army. When an emperor lost the favor of the army, his rule was over. In the 250 years after Nero, there were forty emperors. More than half of them were assassinated, several killed themselves rather than be arrested, and still others died while fighting rival officers who had challenged their rule. Only six emperors during that time reigned for ten years or more.

In 312 several princes were trying to seize the throne. One of them, Constantine, had an experience which changed the course of history. He and his troops were advancing on Rome, where he would do battle with the current emperor, Maximian, and his forces. Before the battle Constantine dreamt of an image of the cross in the sky with the words, "You will conquer by this sign." He had Christ's name inscribed on his soldiers' shields and advanced on Rome. The two armies met at the Milvian Bridge near Rome. Constantine was able to crowd the emperor's forces on the bridge until it collapsed, killing the emperor and many of his troops. Constantine entered the city as its new ruler.

Maximian had continued the laws against Christians enacted by previous emperors. When Constantine became emperor, however, he attributed his victory to the help of the God of the Christians. He began a series of actions that would end the persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire. In the year 313 he and the Emperor of the East issued an edict in which they

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Before the reading, **summarize the objectives of the lesson** on a wall pad or easel pad so that the page can be preserved and used for review next week.

Remind the students that many countries do not have regular elections. In the past most had no elections at all: warfare settled the question of who would be king.

Have the students silently **read the first three paragraphs** of the text; then ask:

- What was the sign promising victory to Constantine? (*The cross, inscribed, "You will conquer by this sign."*)
- How did Constantine defeat the opposing army? (*Crowding them onto the bridge so that it collapsed and many drowned.*)
- Some Christians of the period compared Constantine to Moses. Why do you think they did? (*Both defeated larger armies who were drowned in the sea/river.*)
- What were the two main provisions of the Edict of Milan? (*Christians were allowed to practice their religion; confiscated properties returned to them.*)

Compare this to what happened in 1991 when the Soviet Union was dissolved. From 1917 to 1991 Christians had been persecuted there. Now Christians were free again to practice their faith. Churches were rebuilt or reclaimed. Many people, including government workers who had persecuted Christians, now joined the Churches. The Russian government even built a shrine to Saint George near the United Nations headquarters in New York!

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#### **Background Reading (continued):**

"In popular speech, certain practices and sayings are often called 'traditions.' These customs may or may not be elements of the Tradition itself, which is 'the self-identity of the Church through the ages and is the organic and visible expression of the Life of the Spirit in the Church,' A specific practice could be an element of the Tradition if it is a reflection of the divine life in the Body of Christ. Thus the practice of iconography, which proclaims both the incarnation and the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the saints, is an element of the Tradition" (LLI 75-76).

"Grant to the Christians and others all authority to observe that religion which they preferred," adding "now any one of these who wishes to observe the Christian religion may do so freely and openly, without molestation." The emperor ordered the return of all confiscated churches and any property seized from Christians because of their religion. This "Edict of Milan" began a new era in Salvation History.

**The Church Grows in Freedom**

During the Roman persecutions the Church grew in numbers through the witness of the martyrs. Now able to function freely, it grew in other ways. People who had hidden their faith could now express it freely. Others who had been afraid of joining the Christians could now do so without fear. Churches could be built and adorned with marble or gold, and the government would not confiscate its treasures. Christians could publicly conduct schools or minister to the needy without interference. Constantine believed that he had been given a special mission. "God has committed to me care the administration of all earthly affairs by His alone will," he said. As a result, the fourth century became a brilliant period in the story of the Church.

The Emperor Constantine had churches built in Rome, where Saints Peter and Paul had been martyred, and in the Holy Land at the site of Christ's birth and of His death and resurrection. His mother, Saint Helena, had gone there to search for the place of Christ's tomb and had discovered His cross. From this time Jerusalem became a place of pilgrimage. Christians from all countries would go there to pray at the tomb of the Lord. The Church's new freedom had several effects:

1. **The Liturgy** became more public and more elaborate. Processions could be held in the streets with cantors, incense and music. More elaborate music became part of the services and episcopal vessels like chibars and crosses were donated to the churches. Some of the elaborate pagan temples and public buildings were given to the Christians and became the model for church buildings for years to come.
2. **Ministry to the needy** developed more fully as the Church could now build hospitals and orphanages to help the poor.
3. **Church teaching** reached a higher level as more educated Christians were able to write and publish their works and speak about their faith in public. Some of these teachers would be recognized as **Fathers of the Church**, supplying the Church with new doctrine and leadership.

The writings of the Fathers form an important part of our Christian heritage. They are part of the living Tradition of the Church. These works took many forms: explanations of the Gospel, lectures on the teachings of the Church, defenses against enemies of the faith, homilies, and letters.



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Ask the students to imagine that they were living at the end of the Roman persecutions.

- Where might you have had to meet for Liturgy? (*The woods, homes, caves*)
- Would you have believed the news that you could practice your faith freely or would you have believed it was a trick?
- What would your community have done now that it was free?

Read the next section, "**The Church Grows in Freedom.**" Note that when the Church is free it does all the things mentioned here. Remind the students that Christians are still persecuted in places such as China. Where there is persecution public celebrations, schools, and active ministries may be forbidden. Ask the students to pray for those still suffering for their faith.

Stress that the reason for being a Christian is because we believe in Christ and want to follow Him. But that when there are other benefits coming from it, people, whose faith isn't so strong, may join.

**Ask the students** why they think someone should become a Christian and join our Church. Would these be good reasons for joining the Church?

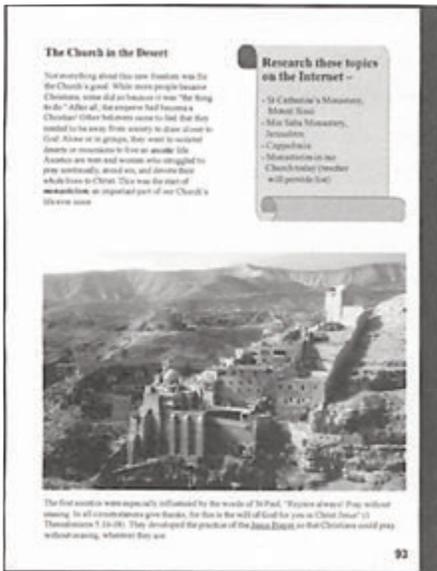
- Because they like the foods made by the ladies' society?
- So they could join the parish basketball team?
- Because it will help them get a job with one of the parishioners?

## The Church in the Desert Page 93

### Background Reading (*Fathers of the Church*):

"The Councils were extraordinary meetings of the bishops, generally called when the Church found itself in a particular crisis. ... However, individual Christians also have had a formative role in expressing the Tradition. These 'Fathers of the Church' are all honored by the Church as witnesses to the tradition of the faith of the Christian people. Most of the Church Fathers were hierarchs, since the specific ministry of a bishop is to be 'a light to those in darkness, an instructor of the ignorant, a teacher to the young, a light to the world' (Byzantine prayer at the ordination of bishops). There were also other prominent members of the Christian community who witnessed to the tradition of the faith: priests, deacons, hymnographers, and especially monastics — both men and women — famed for their asceticism and holiness and sought by the faithful for spiritual direction."

*(continued on next page)*



## Saint Basil the Great Page 94

Have the students **read this section**. Ask what they know about monks, nuns or monasteries (See Grade 5, Lesson 17, "Those Who Announce God's Kingdom"). Connect the ascetic struggle to "pray continually" with its Scriptural origin (1 Thessalonians 5:17) and its development as the Jesus Prayer.

For further information on monastic life, **access the websites** of Holy Resurrection Monastery, a modern monastery in the desert and its affiliated women's community ([www.hrmonline.org](http://www.hrmonline.org)) or these modern mountain monasteries, the monks of Mount Tabor ([www.byzantines.net/monastery](http://www.byzantines.net/monastery)) and Holy Transfiguration Skete ([www.societystiohn.com](http://www.societystiohn.com)).

Have the students **read this section** about this Father who personifies the activities of the Byzantine Church in the fourth century. Direct them to pay **special attention to the description of his conversion**. Then ask the following:

- How did St Basil describe his secular learning? (*The wisdom which had been made foolish by God; the wisdom of the princes of this world*)

## Background Reading (continued):

"The Fathers wrote in a number of forms, the most common being homilies or commentaries, aimed at explaining the Scriptures to the faithful or to the catechumens. St. Cyril of Alexandria, St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. John Chrysostom have left important writings in these forms. Fathers also explained theology for another reason: to provide a defense (in Greek, *apologia*) of the true faith against its detractors both within and from without the Church. Fathers like the second century St. Justin the Philosopher composed apologetic writings to give a true and proper defense of one's actions or beliefs in the still pagan Roman Empire. When the State itself became Christian, 'apologies' were still needed to defend the true understandings of the Church against those who introduced false ideas. Thus, St Irenaeus of Lyons opposed the Gnostics, St. Athanasius of Alexandria combated the Arians, and St. Maximus the Confessor contested the Monothelites.

"In addition to commentaries on Scripture and defenses of the faith, many patristic writings were of a specifically spiritual nature, devoted to describing the Christian life and the ways God works in us through the power of the Holy Spirit. They discerned a definite science of the Christian life, which has found concrete expression in the mystical tradition of the Church. Although most ascetical writings were authored by monastics, they assume that every Christian of any station in life is called to perfection in Christ in some way. As St. John Climacus said, 'A Christian is an imitator of Christ in thought, word and deed, as far as this is humanly possible, and believes mightily and blamelessly in the Holy Trinity' (The Ladder of Divine Ascent 1). "The Fathers' own prayerful experiences of God and the sometime severe struggles and sufferings that they endured shine through their works. In this we see that theology, our understanding of God, is very closely bound up with the living of a life in the Spirit. Accurate knowledge of God involves both correct doctrine and authentic religious experience. Living as close as they did to the primitive Christian community, the Fathers' theology included both" (LLI 82-84).



**6. Activity B (Saint Basil Speaks to Us)**

Distribute Worksheet B. See that the students understand the precepts listed here. Then have the students form groups to work on two skits: one putting Saint Basil's precepts into action and the ignoring his teaching.

**7. Activity C (Byzantium Video)**

View aspects of Part 1 of the following video program: *Byzantium* (Discovery Channel) - Filmed on location in nine countries to bring the vast glory of the Byzantine civilization to life, this fascinating look at the first Christian empire takes the viewer back in time to a majestic culture that spanned eleven centuries and held sway over three continents. Part 1 describes how Constantine, a Christian convert, moved the center of power to this former Greek city in 330 and made it the glory of the Christian world. Remember that as a secular production, it is sometimes inaccurate in its presentation of faith issues.

**8. Activity D (The Kingdom Tree)**

Remind the students of Jesus' Parable of the Mustard Seed (Matthew 13:31-32; Mark 4:30-32) and the project of the Kingdom Tree. Have the students draw a branch representing Constantine the Great and the Fathers of the Church.

**9. Time Line**

Refer to the time line poster. Have the students brainstorm the names of people mentioned in this lesson (*SS Constantine the Great, and Fathers of the Church Athanasius the Great, Basil the Great, Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory Nazianzen, and John Chrysostom*) and indicate the period in which each lived. Write in the names and dates under each appropriate heading to show the newly-liberated Church developing in freedom.

**10. Summary**

End the lesson by summarizing the lesson from the aims on page 264, from the elements in the student text on which you focused, and/or from any other points raised in the lesson.

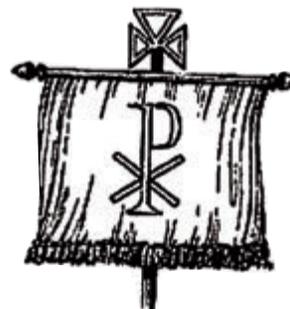
**11. Closing Prayer**

Conclude with the reading of the kontakion on page 95 in the student text.

## “You Will Conquer by This Sign”

*After Constantine the Great experienced the vision of the cross, he had the "monogram " of Christ inscribed on a banner leading his army into battle. A few years later Constantine's friend, Bishop Eusebius, described it like this:*

*"Now it was made in the following manner. A long spear, overlaid with gold, formed the figure of the cross by means of a transverse bar laid over it. On the top of the whole was fixed a wreath of gold and precious stones; and within this, the symbol of the Savior's name, two letters indicating the name of Christ by means of its initial characters, the letter P being intersected by X in its center: and these letters the emperor was in the habit of wearing on his helmet at a later period. From the cross-bar of the spear was suspended a cloth, a royal piece, covered with a profuse embroidery of most brilliant precious stones; and which, being also richly interlaced with gold, presented an indescribable degree of beauty to the beholder. This banner was of a square form, and the upright staff, whose lower section was of great length, bore a golden half-length portrait of the pious emperor and his children on its upper part, beneath the trophy of the cross, and immediately above the embroidered banner."*



BANNER AND CROSS OF CONSTANTINE

*The letters which look like our P and X are really the Greek letters Chi (X) and Rho (P), the first letters of the name ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ (Christ) in capital letters.*

*Other Greek monograms Christians use to indicate the Lord's name are*

**IC XC** – The first and last letters of **Ἰησοῦς** and **Χριστός** (Jesus Christ) in small letters. It is used in the inscription **IC XC NIKA** which is stamped on the bread used in the Divine Liturgy.

**ΙΗΣ** – The first three letters of **Ἰησοῦς** (Jesus).

## Saint Basil Speaks to Us

*The Fathers of the Church have left us important writings in which they explain the meaning of the Scriptures and the teachings of our faith. The following is part of a letter written by Saint Basil that reminds us of some important sides of Christian living:*

"The Christian ought to have thoughts worthy of the heavenly calling and order his life worthy of the Gospel of Christ.

- The Christian must not let anything blow or drag him away from the remembrance of God, His will, and His judgments;
- The Christian must not blaspheme, curse, fight, avenge oneself, render evil for evil, or act in anger;
- One should be patient, whatever one has to suffer. Even though we have the right to scold the one who has wronged us, we must do this not in passion for having been wronged, but in hope of correcting the other, according to the precept of our Lord;
- One must not say anything against someone absent and slander that person, even if what is said be true;
- One should stay away from those who complain about others;
- One should not let the sun set when someone has been angry with us, lest night separate both from each other and leave a verdict against us on the Day of Judgment;
- One should not wait for an occasion to make things right, because we cannot be sure of what will happen tomorrow; many who have made many plans have not reached tomorrow."

*Pick one or two of these thoughts and plan a skit putting this idea into action. Then show what might happen when we ignore Saint Basil's teaching.*

## The Kingdom Tree

*Add a branch marked **The Church Is Freed**, representing Constantine the Great and the Fathers of the Church mentioned in this lesson.*

